Ray Vukcevich: White Guys in Space

Fantasy & Science Fiction

AUGUST

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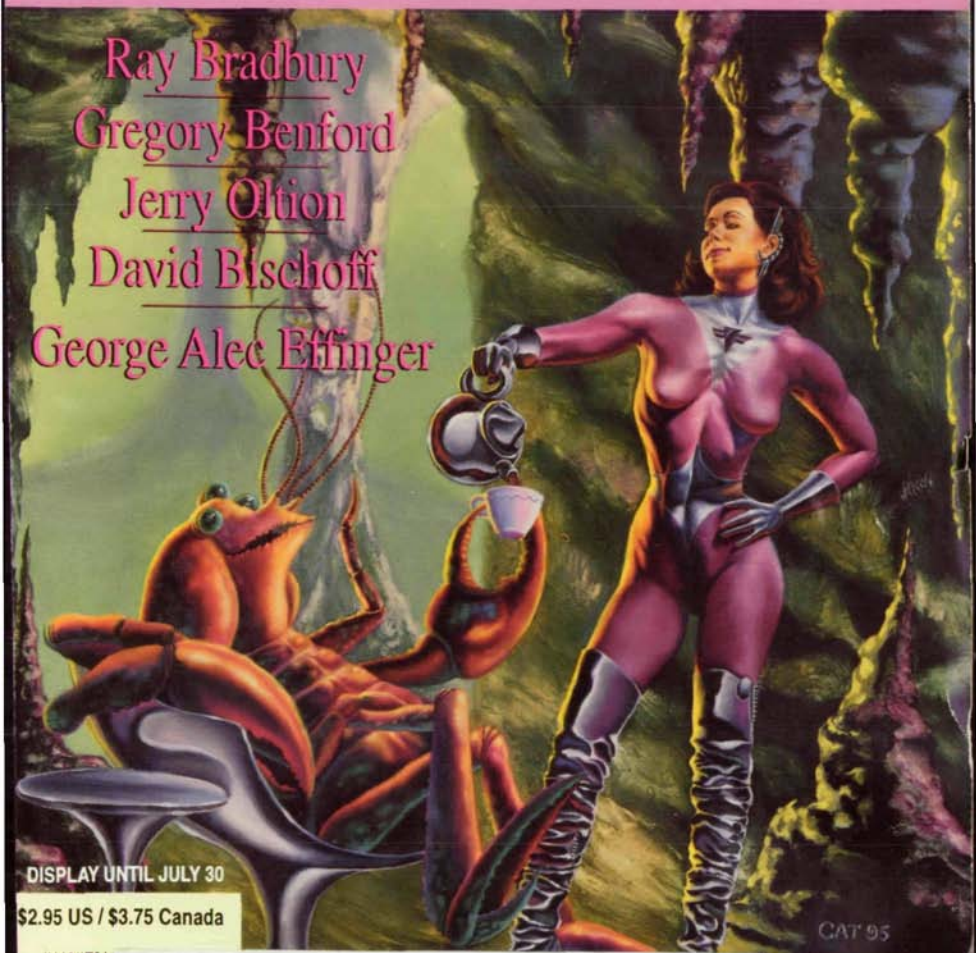

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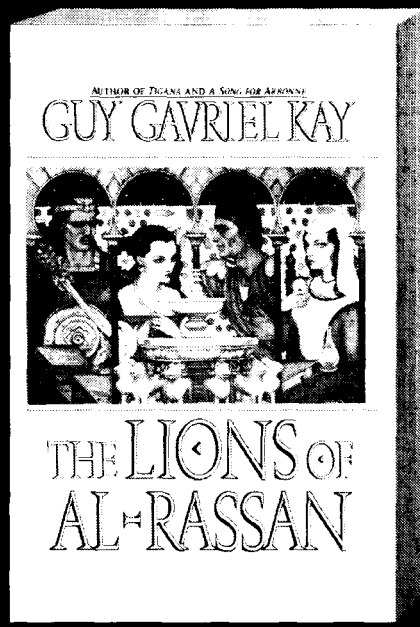

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

THE SAD BUT great truth of American publishing is that it is a business. This truth is sad because deals are no longer brokered on a handshake. An editor who believes in a writer, as Maxwell Perkins once believed in F. Scott Fitzgerald, can no longer put himself on the line for that writer time and time again. Now said editor must, after two or three attempts, bow to market forces and cut the writer loose.[1]

This truth is great because publishing companies now know how to put books in front of readers. Books not only appear in bookstores and the modern equivalent of the newsstand, but also at grocery stores, video stores, and discount department stores like K-Mart and Target. Anyone can buy a book at any time of day in every city in this country. [Even my small town of a few thousand has a Circle K open all night, with a few best-selling paperbacks on a rack near the biker magazines.][2]

I promised, in my last editorial, to do a series on publishing and how it affects the reader. And nothing, I think, affects the reader more than the way publishers do business.

Publishing has always been a business. It simply used to be a lot more Mom & Pop than it is now.

[1] Of course, if you read the history of Fitzgerald and Perkins, you realize that in some ways Perkins did cut Fitzgerald loose. His books never sold to expectations and, even though he once defined a generation, by the early thirties that generation was being blamed for all the world's ills. Perkins continued to buy Fitzgerald's novels — or at least, to advance him money on them — but the money decreased as time went on. Gradually Fitzgerald, like all writers who are profligate with money, and whose success diminishes over time, turned to Hollywood. And there he died, revised and rewritten by writers who lacked his stature and his sense of story but who knew how to meet a deadline with a minimum of fuss.

[2] Publishing has grown into such a large business that the number of new titles has increased dramatically. In the forty years from the end of World War II to the end of Ronald Reagan's first term in office, the number of new books [hardcover and paperback] published per year grew from 6,548 titles [in 1945] to over 51,000 titles [in 1985]. Or to put it in terms a science fiction reader can relate to: in 1945, an sf devotee could conceivably read everything published in the genre. That is simply impossible today.

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One hundred years ago, Scribner and Putnam were real people. They worked upstairs from the editors, sat in on editorial meetings, and occasionally made decisions from their heart rather than their pocket books. Nowadays, heart is still involved, but it is removed from the center of power. Publishing has gone corporate — and corporations are concerned with the bottom line.

The easiest way to see this concern is in trilogies and bestsellers. Let me deal with trilogies first, since that is nearest and dearest to my own heart.[3]

Publishers make their money in a variety of ways (such as selling subsidiary rights), but the main way they make their money is the same way other product-oriented businesses do: through sales. If the sales of a particular product are low, then that product is discontinued.

Sometimes writers are considered a product (more on that later), sometimes individual books are, and most certainly, a book series is. In order for trilogies to be successful, their sales arc must run like this: Book One must sell to expectations. Book Two must sell as well or better than Book One. Book Three must continue that upward spiral.

Most fantasy readers have noticed that many writers publish Books One and Two of a trilogy and Book Three never makes it to print. What has happened in that case is this: Book Two sold significantly fewer copies than Book One. The publisher looked at the bottom line, and decided that it was more cost effective to anger one writer and a few thousand readers than to publish Book Three. Simply put, the sales of the series didn't justify the cost of producing the third book.

[What you can do, as a reader, to prevent this from happening is simple: Buy Book One when it appears on the stand. Buy Book Two when it appears as well. Even if you don't read a series until it's complete, buy the books. Otherwise, you might have to scour used bookstores for copies. If you like a series, buy copies for your friends. And remember that sales of the second book are more important than sales of the first. The second book's sales must remain the same as the first or *increase*.]

Let me show you the other clear area of the corporate bottom line at work. And this one, unless you've

[3] I am in the process of writing and publishing a fantasy series. Bantam Books published the first book in *The Fey, The Sacrifice*, in January, and the second book, *The Changeling*, in June. They'll publish the third book toward the end of the year. Since I hope there will be a fourth and fifth book, I am watching the sales figures closely, and keeping my fingers crossed.

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owned or worked a business, seems counterintuitive at first.

Bestsellers are a marketing category. Books bought for a lot of money are expected to generate a lot of money. Publishing is a haphazard business: no one has done complete studies (and probably no one can) on what makes a book catch the public imagination. Publishers send out hundreds of books each year, hoping that most of them will sell to expectation, and that a few will sell beyond expectation. Books that do not sell to expectation still sell a lot of copies. But those copies aren't enough to recoup the publisher's expenses.[4]

People who write bestsellers are Brand Names or wannabe Brand Names. If the bestseller doesn't meet expectations, then the author's name value goes down. Many writers become (in rock 'n roll parlance) one-shot wonders. Their book goes out at 200,000 copies, sells only 50,000 and the writer is never heard from again.

Smart writers change their name and try again.[5]

Every year, *Publisher's Weekly* publishes a list of the big books that succeeded and the big books that failed. Failures from 1995's list include Robert James Waller's *Puerto Vallarta Squeeze*, R.L. Stine's adult book *Superstitious*, and Philip Roth's award-winning *Sabbbath's Theater*. Those folks won't have to change their names because they have a track record. But I wouldn't trade places with Eric Zencey, whose novel *Panama* was supposed to be the next *Alienist*, and only sold one quarter of the promised 100,000 print run. He'd better hope the book does better in paperback than it did in hardcover. If it doesn't, he might search for a pen name a little farther up the alphabet.

Who pays for these failures? Ultimately you do. All these trial balloons make their way into the average cost of a book. But before you start complaining, let me warn you: the cost of these trial balloons is minimal compared to everything else you're paying for when you slap down your $24.95. And that subject, too big to handle in this month's space, will be the focus of next month.

---

[4] This is the same sort of accounting that gets so much press in the film industry. If you think of *Waterworld* and how much money it cost versus the amount it brought in, you have a good idea of what I'm talking about here.

[5] *F&SF* writer Kit Reed has an open pseudonym (Kit Craig) for her suspense novels. Mystery writer Barbara Michaels has two bestselling names. The late romantic suspense writer, Victoria Holt, had three bestselling names — out of at least six different attempts.

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Since publishing is a big business and it does, of necessity, concentrate on the bottom line, a lot of books disappear. A lot of series end in the middle. A lot of authors are one-shot wonders. Sometimes I find it amazing that so many writers make it at all. But books do succeed, and those that do usually have good stories, excellent covers, and wonderful word-of-mouth.

As readers, you can't do much to help the bestsellers. The numbers involved are so great that one person cannot make a difference. But with every other type of book, from mainstream to romance, from mystery to science fiction, your dollar counts. A book is only on the stands for a few weeks (I'll discuss this more next month), so buy it when you see it. If you like the book, buy extra copies from a bookstore that sells new titles. (If you buy from a used store, it doesn't help the book's sales figures.) Tell your friends about the book in a timely fashion, so that they can buy the book during its few weeks on the stands.

But one of the best things you can do if you like a book doesn't cost you a cent. Check the bookstores in your area. Some will have that book and others won't. In the stores that don't, ask why not. Check to see if the book is on order. If it isn't, request a copy. You do not have to special order (although that's always nice. Remember, though, that if you special order, you have to buy the book). Bookstores keep a tally of requests, and sometimes when even one person requests a book, the store will order it. Many times, the book is in the back and has never made it to the shelf (more on that next month). The clerk might pull the book out of its box and put it where people can buy it.

One of the best things you can do if you like a book is generate word of mouth. Review the book for the local paper. Have friends in other cities request copies at their local bookstores. Place a notice on a computer bulletin board. If you succeed in generating word of mouth about a book, it will stay on the stands longer. Bookstores will reorder, and the book will stay in print.

One final suggestion: if you like a book and want to give it as a gift, buy the copies when the book is on the stands. Buy a few copies at the chains and then buy the inventory at your local independent bookstore. The independent will usually reorder. The individual chain stores usually won't.

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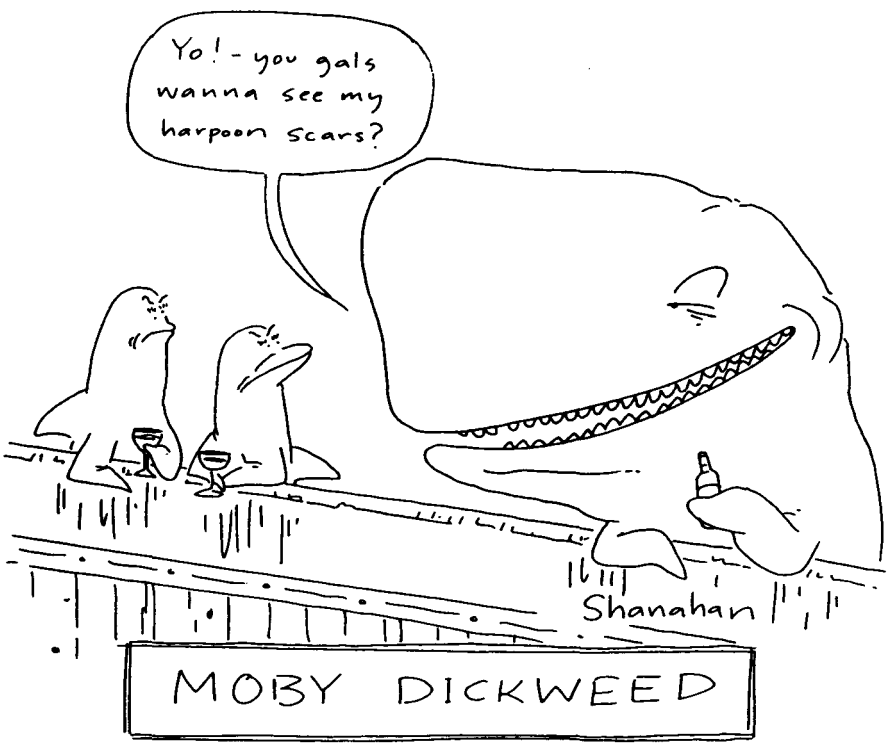
You may think these recommendations are small things, but they're not. They matter. Most readers don't realize that they can affect a book's shelf life, but that they have to do so within a prescribed time. Even though we, as readers, think of books as permanent, to publishers, booksellers, and even some authors, books are product. And in business, product must either sell well or be replaced with something that will.

Publishing is a business for good or ill, and no amount of griping will change that. Instead, understanding that business and using that understanding to your own benefit as a reader will keep the books you like on the shelves longer — and will enable that writer (or that type of book) to be published again.

Next month, I'll tell you why the books you read cost five times more than they did fifteen years ago — and what it would take to bring the prices down. And please do remember to send me any questions you might have. I'll try to address them as I go along.



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Perhaps we should simply accept the fact that Ray Vukcevich does not see the world the way anyone else does. His mind, which created the popular (and slightly off-center) story "Counting on Me," for our October/November 1995 issue, and the equally well known "Mom's Little Friends" from our April 1992 issue, has again taken a sideways turn. And this time, it produced another story worth much conversation (and the inspiration for Cathleen Thole's cover), "White Guys in Space."

About "White Guys in Space," Ray writes, "Do you think this one will get us a rant from Newt on C-Span?" One can only hope.

White Guys in Space

By Ray Vukcevich

1

AFTER AN OBLIGATORY period of lies and damn lies, the 104th congress repealed the 1960s, and Worldmaster Jones, secret CEO for AmerEarth Corp, and his right-hand hatchet man, Coordinator Grey, popped into existence.

"Boy, it's about time," Jones said.

"You got that right, Worldmaster," said Grey.

Jones rang for his secretary.

"Yes, Worldmaster?"

"Have the boys get my helicar ready, Nancy," Jones said, "and bring in a couple of cups of coffee."

2

Not to mention the bug-eyed lobster men from Alpha Centauri.

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3

"Wow! Would you look at all the knobs!" Joe said when he peeked into the control cabin of the spaceship. Joe, who was doing simultaneous degrees in atomic physics, medieval studies, entomology, philosophy, hotel/motel management, linguistics, and electrical engineering at Yale, knew a thing or two about spaceships.

His buddy Frank, home for the holidays from Harvard where he was majoring in chemistry, mathematics, Victorian detective fiction, farm management, and computer science, rubbed a hand across his blond crewcut and joined Joe at the window of the unfinished craft. "Gosh," he said, "do you think it'll really work?"

"You've got to have faith in our friend the atom, boys." Doc pulled his head out of the access hatch and waved a socket wrench at Frank. "Of course it'll work!"

Doc, who had always been just a little too far out for the universities, had streaks of gray running through his unruly hair and a perpetually preoccupied look on his craggy face. Joe guessed he was in his forties. He wore a white lab coat and black loafers.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" someone called from the garage doorway.

"Uh oh," Doc said. "Trouble."

Frank elbowed Joe in the ribs. "You can close your mouth now," he said. "It's just Nancy."

"Hi, Doctor Tim!" The young woman stepped into the garage and smiled, and Joe's heart missed a beat.

4

Meanwhile the slimy lobster men from Alpha Centauri, who had been going somewhere else entirely before the sixties had been repealed, turned their scaly attention to Earth, and what they saw they liked. By the time Joe and Frank helped Doc get the spaceship upright and onto its tail fins and aimed at the moon, the lobster men only had bug-eyes for Earth women.

5

"You can't go," Frank said.

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"I can, too!"

"Tell her she can't go, Doc," Frank said.

"You can't go, Nancy."

"Hey, why not?" Joe spoke up suddenly, and the two other men looked at him like he'd gone crazy.

"Look, you guys," Nancy said, "this is the story of the century. You've got to let me go along. The first people on the moon! I was born to cover this story."

"That's the first *men*," Frank said. "The first *men* on the moon."

"Is that why you're taking Spot?"

"Hey! Spot's a spacedog."

6

"Actually, this could be to our advantage," Worldmaster Jones said. "Let's see if we can't cut a deal with the seafood."

"But what could we have that they'd want?" asked Coordinator Grey.

7

"Ten," Doc said.

"What?"

"He said 'ten.'"

"Ten what?"

"Nine," Doc said.

"I thought you said he said 'ten?'"

"Eight," Doc said.

"I give up." Joe threw up his hands and leaned back in the contoured spacechair and looked up at the sky through the forward viewports. It would be a long time before he saw that sky again. He wondered if he might lose Nancy altogether. Could their relationship hold up under the strain of his just going off into space right after they'd first met? Well, a man has to to what a man has to do. He would suffer this sweet anguish in stony silence.

"Seven," Doc said.

"Maybe you'd better start flipping switches," Frank said. He made a few quick calculations with his slipstick and jotted down the results on a pad on the arm of his spacechair.

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"Six," Doc said.

"Good idea," Joe said. "Doc seems to be preoccupied. As you know, Frank, he's done all the calculations for the trip in his head."

"Five," Doc said.

"Just checking," Frank grumbled. He put his slipstick away. "Did you remember to close the supply hatch?"

"Four," Doc said.

"Me?" Joe finished flipping a bank of switches before turning to look at Frank. "You were supposed to close that hatch. Hey, Doc, I think Frank forgot to close the supply hatch."

"Three," Doc said.

"Look," Frank said, "I clearly remember asking you to close the hatch."

"Two," Doc said.

"Darn it, Frank," Joe said. He unsnapped his harness and swung his legs around off his chair.

"One," Doc said.

"Oh, sit still," Frank said. He unsnapped his own harness. "If you're going to pout, I'll go shut it."

"Blast off!" Doc cried.

8

"Something has risen from the surface of the planet," Z'p said, and then dropped flat to the floor in a show of respect.

"So, shoot it down," Hivekeeper B'b said. "Do I have to think of everything?"

"Thinking of everything is your job," muttered Z'p.

"What did you say?"

"I said we're too far out to shoot it down, Hivekeeper."

"How long before we get to the moon?"

"We're almost there now."

9

The blue and white curve of Earth had been visible briefly before Doc aimed the nose of the ship at the moon. Now there was nothing much to see and nothing much to do but eat lunch. Joe, Frank, Doc, and Spot floated

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around the control cabin eating Pork & Beans from cans and drinking orange pop.

"What was that noise?" Frank asked.

"Noise?" Doc said.

"I didn't hear anything," Joe said.

"Arf," said Spot.

"Well, I heard it," Frank said. He left his spoon sticking in his can of Pork & Beans and the can floating in the air and swam down to the door to the supply closet. He seized the handle and threw open the door. Nancy tumbled out with a yelp.

10

Meanwhile, back on Earth, Mrs. Jones put a perfect pot roast on the dining room table. She arranged the carving knife and fork on the platter and adjusted the angles of their handles so they would be just where the Worldmaster expected them to be when he reached for them to carve the roast. She hurried back into the kitchen for the mashed potatoes. The doorbell rang.

"Oh, double darn!" she said. She glanced around quickly to see if anyone had heard her. Worldmaster Jones would not tolerate rough language. He would be in his den smoking his pipe. Would he answer the door on his own? Well, maybe when...maybe when...well, maybe when heck got a lot colder. Oh my, such thoughts. The doorbell rang again.

"Oh, Worldmaster Jones," she called, "would you mind getting that, Dear?"

Of course, he would get the door, the old bear, but he wouldn't like it. "Where's Billy?" he growled as he came out of his den.

"Here I am, Worldmaster," Billy said coming down the stairs in his baseball outfit. He snatched the cap off his head when he saw the fire smoldering in his father's eyes.

"And do you suppose you could get the door?" Worldmaster Jones rattled his newspaper at the boy.

"I thought Mom would get it," Billy said on his way to the front door.

Worldmaster Jones paused in the doorway of his den so he could see who was at the door. His wife did the same from her spot by the dining room table. Billy opened the door.

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A young man in a neat black suit and a thin tie greeted Billy. "Hello, is your mother or father home?"

"Well." Billy glanced back at Worldmaster Jones who pretended to read his paper.

The young man must have figured it out. He stepped up the volume of his voice. "I'm asking for donations for basic services." He had a tin can with a thin slit for change cut into the top. "Police, fire, city services, roads and streets, health care and food for the poor, schools from kindergarten to the university. You know, everything but the military. Can I count on you folks?"

"Dinner's ready," Mrs. Jones called brightly.

Worldmaster Jones stepped forward. "Thank you, young man, but we gave at the office." He closed the door.

11

"If I hadn't pulled that hatch closed behind me, you'd all be sucking vacuum!" Nancy said. "It's not like you can just put me out." When she wasn't talking she was chewing her gum a mile a minute, and Joe wondered what it would be like to shut her up with a kiss. "I mean you really wouldn't do that, would you, Doctor Tim?"

"I don't know," Frank said. "What do you think, Doc?"

"Of course we won't put her out!" Joe pushed off the wall and did a superman dive for her, but she grabbed a handhold and moved out of the way before he arrived. Joe sailed on past her with a goofy smile on his face and crashed head first into the wall.

"Besides," he said, rubbing his head, "we could use a woman's touch around here. Aren't you guys getting tired of Pork & Beans?"

Frank admitted grudgingly that he for one was getting tired of Pork & Beans.

"Arf!" said Spot.

"And I can finally get a cup of coffee," Doc said.

12

The lobster men from Alpha Centauri landed on the back side of the moon and scuttled from the sunshine into deep lunar caverns and tunnels they dug as they went along. Soon the moon was infested with lobsters.

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"So, what do we do now?" Z'p asked.

"We wait for the women," Hivekeeper B'b said.

13

Joe's hand might have been a creature with a mind of its own as it skulked like a white spider across the back of the spacechair behind Nancy's head. A few more inches and he could drop his arm around her shoulders.

The moon was huge and bright in the forward viewports.

"Oh, look how big it is," Nancy said.

"What?" Joe felt his face go red.

Frank chuckled wickedly.

"Arf," said Spot.

"Get ready to land on the moon, boys," Doc said.

14

"What I don't understand, Worldmaster Jones," Coordinator Grey said, "is how your secretary got onto a spaceship heading for the moon."

"If you can't spot a spy when you see one, Coordinator Grey," Worldmaster Jones said, "I begin to doubt your abilities."

15

Joe, Frank, Doc, and Spot pressed their faces against the glass as they gazed out at the lunar landscape. Nancy jumped and poked and pushed and pinched from behind trying to squeeze in for a look herself. They'd gotten into the formfitting spacesuits Doc had designed and each carried a fishbowl helmet. In fact, Doc carried two, Spot being unable to carry his own.

"Ow," Frank said when Nancy pinched his ear. He moved away from the viewport and she took his place. "Say, Doc," he said, "how come you just happened to have a babe suit on hand for Nancy?"

"You think that be prepared stuff is just words?" Doc asked.

"Oh, look," Nancy said.

"What can they be?" Joe asked.

"Moon monsters?" Nancy offered.

"What are you talking about?" Frank asked.

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"I don't think so," Doc said. "They seem to be wearing life-support systems themselves. If they were native to the moon they wouldn't need spacesuits."

"Well, I think we should go out and meet them," Nancy said. "I could get an interview."

"So, you're feeling like a snack?" Joe asked.

"Girls." Frank rolled his eyes.

"Look," Nancy said, "they're waving at us."

16

"What are you doing, Hivekeeper?" Z'p was mystified at the strange antics of his leader. The Hivekeeper bounced up and down on his back legs and clicked both of his claws above his head.

"It's the Intergalactic Babe Call," the Hivekeeper said. "If there are women in there, they won't be able to resist this."

17

"Me first," Nancy said, elbowing her way up to the airlock.

"No way!" Frank cried. "If anyone should be the first man on the moon, it should be Doc."

"Well, even if I go first," Nancy said, "Doctor Tim can still be the first *man* on the moon."

"She does have a point." Joe pulled Frank aside.

"What point?"

"Well, a point of politeness," Joe said. "It's always Ladies First."

"Well, I don't know."

"In your heart you know I'm right, Frank."

"See? That's the trouble with having women on board in the first place," Frank said. "I knew we'd come to a conundrum like this sooner or later."

Air whooshed out of the cabin.

"Hey!" Frank shouted. "She didn't do the doors right!"

"Close it!" Joe shouted. "Watch out!" He grabbed Spot by the tail before the spacedog could be blown out onto the lunar surface.

Frank got the airlock door closed. They hurried to the viewport to see what had happened to Nancy.

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Nancy, the glass bubble of her helmet reflecting a glitter scattering of stars, put out her hands in a peaceful gesture and walked toward the line of lobster men.

"Oh, Nancy," Joe whispered.

When Nancy got to the line of lobster men, they grabbed her and scrambled off like a swarm of cockroaches.

"Come on!" Joe shouted. "We've got to get out there and save her."

18

The lobster men dragged Nancy deep into the bowels of the moon.

"So, what did you think of Earth when you first saw it?" Nancy was trying to do her job. "Tell me, do you guys have plans for an invasion of the planet itself? What do you do when you're not waging interstellar wars? Are there any more like you at home?"

The lobster men tossed Nancy into a rock chamber and closed the door behind her. Sitting at a table in the middle of the room were the biggest lobster man yet and a human being.

"Worldmaster Jones!" Nancy exclaimed.

"Yes, it's me," Jones said. "Did you think for a moment that you fooled me by pretending to be my secretary back on Earth? Don't make me laugh. The moment you walked in, Nancy, I knew you were a perky, gum-snapping, wisecracking girl reporter."

"So, where do we go from here?" Nancy asked. "I mean just what are you up to? Selling out the human race to these lobster guys? And what happens to me?"

"As for your first question," Worldmaster Jones said, "you shouldn't worry your pretty little head over such matters. As for your second question, you can make yourself useful. I've been dying to show B'b here what a good cup of coffee is like. You'll find the proper equipment through that tunnel."

19

Frank touched helmets with Joe. "It's hopeless," he said. "There are just too many tunnels. We'll never find her."

"We'll keep looking," Joe said.

"Arf," Spot said.

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"Hey! Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Spot," Joe said. "I heard Spot. There must be air in here!"

"Arf," Spot said again, confirming Joe's speculation.

"So who's going to take his helmet off first?" Frank asked.

"We could draw straws."

"Where's Doc?" Frank asked. "He ought to be here to take his chances with the rest of us."

"Oh, fiddlesticks. Are we going to have to rescue him, too?"

"We could just pull Spot's helmet off," Frank said.

"Arf!" said Spot.

"You really are a rascal aren't you, Frank."

"It was a joke." Frank reached down to Spot, but the spacedog backed away with a little snarl curling his lip.

"Oh well," Joe said. "Here goes." He pulled his helmet off and took a deep breath.

Doc came around the corner carrying his helmet under his arm and dragging a sack through the moon dust.

"What you got there, Doc?"

"Bag o' swords, boys," he said. "This ought to even out the odds."

"Yeah!"

"Man oh man!"

The guys spent a few minutes slicing the air with sabers, and then Doc called them back to order. "This way, boys," he said.

20

"So." Worldmaster Jones put his cup of coffee down and looked deep into the many faceted eyes of the Hivekeeper. "Do we have a deal?"

"Let me get this straight," Hivekeeper B'b said, "you get the secret of faster-than-light travel, and we get a very large number of Earth women. You wouldn't be trying to bamboozle the old Hivekeeper, would you, Worldmaster?"

"Whatever do you mean, B'b?"

"He means," Nancy said, "I'm the only woman on the moon, and one is not exactly a very large number." She reached around the Worldmaster and filled his cup.

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"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," Worldmaster Jones said. "At this very moment, Coordinator Grey is rounding up boatloads of the most er...well, spirited of our coffee makers, toothsome downtown honeys gleaned from the streets of our major cities, shapely dames from our secretarial pools, beach chicks and housewives — you name it. By the time you whisper in my ear the secret of your faster-than-light drive, the moon will be swarming with women!"

21

Back to back with Frank, Joe fought his way through a phalanx of clicking and clacking, snapping and biting lobsters. Suddenly, way down the tunnel, he saw Spot run out and bark at him and then run around the bend in the tunnel and a moment later he was back barking again.

"Let's work our way down that way," Joe huffed at Frank. The two men chopped their way through the lobster men toward the spacedog. They broke free of the melee and ran. Joe scooped up Spot as they passed into the tunnel. A light gleamed at the far end, and the lobsters seemed reluctant to follow them.

They rushed into a chamber where they saw an Earth man drinking coffee with a huge lobster. Nancy hovered around the table with a silver coffee pot.

"Joe!" she cried.

Joe took three giant steps across the floor and lopped off the head of the huge lobster.

"Oh yuck," Nancy said, knowing without asking who would be expected to clean up the blue blood splattered everywhere.

"Hold it right there," Worldmaster Jones said. He produced a spacepistol like magic and shot Frank in the shoulder.

"Hey, no fair!" Joe cried. "You said to hold it and we held it. What's with the shooting?"

"I just wanted you to know I was serious," Worldmaster Jones said.

Spot waddled over to Frank where he lay on the floor holding his shoulder. The spacedog whined and licked Frank's face. "So you're my friend in the end, after all," Frank said.

"You'll never get away with this," Joe told Worldmaster Jones.

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"You idiot," the Worldmaster said. "You don't even know what I'm trying to get away with. I could tell you before I kill you, but since you're the only one who doesn't know what I'm up to, I don't think I'll bother. Say your prayers and die puzzled."

"Nancy?" Joe reached out to her with his eyes. "If a miracle happens, and we somehow get out of this, will you marry me?"

"Oh, Joe," she said, eyes suddenly moist, face all aglow and out of focus.

Before Worldmaster Jones could shoot Joe down like a dog, Doc rushed into the room with a machine. He put the device on the floor and dropped to his knees in front of it.

Joe used the diversion to slip over to Nancy and put his arm around her shoulders.

Doc's machine hummed and buzzed. Worldmaster Jones leaped to his feet. Spot tugged at Frank until Frank rolled over and crawled to Joe and Nancy.

"What is it, Doc?" Joe asked.

"The missing sixties," Doc said.

"Until this very moment," Joe said, "I'd forgotten they were missing."

"Shut up, Joe," Doc said, twisting knobs like crazy. "We're tuning in."

"But we don't understand, Doctor Tim."

"Please be quiet, Nancy," Doc said. "We're turning on."

"Arf?" Spot said.

"That's right, Spot," Doctor Tim said and got to his feet and stretched out his hands to his young friends. "We're dropping out."

They linked hands and made a circle around Doc's machine, and the machine reached through the clouds of cold corporate atomotraps and gotmines, regularly tossed like sand into the eyes of the world, and spread the curtains of patriotic songs they hadn't until that moment realized were masking the sounds of pain and protest and waved away the smoke from huddling masses of the formerly invisible homeless and hungry and seized the missing years and pulled them singing and swaying back into existence, and the air filled with springtime, and flowers fell like warm rain, and the sun came down into the bowels of the moon just so it could set again in glorious shades of purple and green.

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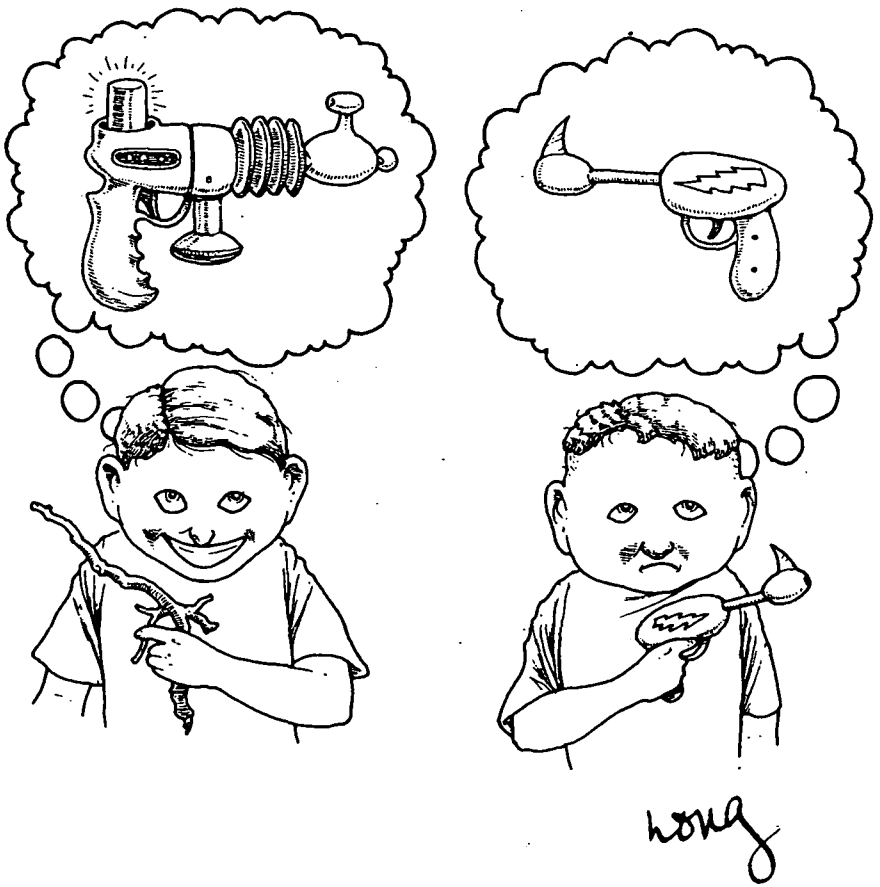
"Noooooooo!" Worldmaster Jones cried as he went out of phase with everything and faded away.

The lobster men packed up their things and went home. "So, Nancy," Joe said. "Now that we're safe, how about marrying me?"

She slipped a hand into the back pocket of his jeans and squeezed. "Let's sleep on it," she said.



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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

Bellwether, by Connie Willis, Bantam, 248pp, $11.95

Lunatics, by Bradley Denton, St. Martin's Press, 336pp, $22.95

I'LL ADMIT it: I've got a peculiar (not to say narrow) taste in humor. Most of what passes for comedy out there leaves me yawning (or, worse, running for the exits). I never got much out of *Saturday Night Live*, even in the days of coneheads and samurai when, I'm told, it was good. I can't watch movies like *City Slickers II*. And it's been a long time since a TV sitcom had any effect on my funnybone.

All of which gives some people the idea that I don't have a sense of humor. Me? Come on. I laughed uproariously at...well, I got a good chuckle out of...um. Really, though, there's plenty that gets the guffaw from me: Monty Python, Ed Wood movies, *Pinky and the Brain*, some *New Yorker* cartoons ("On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog"), *Raising Arizona*. But I can see what makes some people wonder. I've rarely found much to like in humorous sf and funny fantasy — even in writers like Terry Pratchett, recommended by people whose taste I respect. So I looked around to see if I could find examples of comedy — or at least lighter fare — that tickle me, just to prove that, by gum, I *do* have a sense of humor.

Connie Willis's name came to mind right away — her story "At the Rialto" is one of my favorite funny stories ever, and her latest novel, *Bellwether*, seemed to be mining a similar vein. The narrator is Sandra Foster, a researcher with the HiTek corporation, studying the genesis of fads like dance marathons and coffee bars. Her research isn't getting anywhere, not least because of the chaos generated by the company's "interdepartmental assistant," Flip, who's constantly losing packages, spreading gossip,

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and generally interfering with any actual work getting done. One of Flip's misdelivered packages brings Sandra down to the biology wing, where she meets Bennett O'Reilly, another HiTek scientist, who's studying information exchange among primate groups — and who, interestingly enough, seems to be immune to fads. His clothes, his office, his very person exudes stylelessness, and Sandra's fascinated: if she can figure out what makes Bennett so resistant to trends, maybe she can get a better sense of how they spread in the first place.

And so the farce is afoot. Sandra navigates the stormy seas of corporate "sensitivity exercises," cellular-phone proposals from her trendy ex-boyfriend Billy Ray, Flip's interoffice petition-of-the-week, and the company's incomprehensible new requisition forms, while vainly trying to determine what started the hair-bobbing fad of the 1920s, until all the confusion leads her into a joint project with Bennett working with not monkeys but sheep (she figures it'll give her a good feel for herd behavior). The plot's got all the contrivance of a 1940s romantic comedy, but it's spiced throughout with the wit that's made Willis a favorite convention toastmistress. "Barbie's one of those fads," Sandra tells us, "whose popularity makes you lose all faith in the human race." Sandra's voice is fun to listen to, brimming with miscellany on fads of the past and sardonic observations on fads of the present. Willis keeps the story moving almost too fast to think about, which I think is a key to making comedy of this over-the-top sort work: when the pace slackens, so does the audience's smile.

Now and then the pop culture send-up gets a little overblown, as with the trendy cafe where the name and the menu change weekly, but most of the time Willis's eye is dead-on, as in the scene of a birthday party for one of Sandra's coworkers' children. The kids are all dressed in franchised clothing ("Pocahontas pinafores" and "a Lion King jumper"), and the mothers speak in paraphrasings from self-help childcare books: "'I can't believe you're still using time-outs,'" says one mom to another who has just sent her child away as punishment. "'Everybody's using holding now,'" she explains, since it "'produces a feeling of interceptive safety'" (whatever that might be).

As amusing a book as *Bellwether* is, I don't think it would work for me on jokes alone. Two hundred forty-eight pages is a long way to go on one-liners and setpieces. But as she did in "At the

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Rialto," Willis weaves into *Bellwether* a conceit with a bit more depth and even a non-trivial lesson or two hidden within. Throughout the book a kind of feedback loop develops between the scientific principles under discussion (chaos theory, information diffusion, nonlinear systems, etc.) and the subjective experience of the narrator. It's not merely how chaos theory begins to bear upon Sandra's own work on fads, but how the vocabulary of science illuminates events in her life (and vice versa). She starts thinking of things in terms of her research ("Had I spread the feeling onto him, like some kind of virus, and was that how fads spread, by infection?"), and even when she's joking — when she tells Bennett that she only knows about chaos "from personal experience" — there's still the echo of significance in it, a playful use of scientific metaphor that's occasion for thought beyond its usefulness as a running gag.

The interplay between the science and the people in *Bellwether* does more than offer food for thought — it also helps alleviate a problem I frequently find in comic novels: it's hard to maintain a sense of momentum once the premises are established without resorting to plot structures that puncture the atmosphere of humor (this is what so often happens to sitcoms that run for more than a couple of years; they start having "very special" episodes about real social problems or deaths in the family). Willis uses the steady accretion of metaphorical insights and recombined scientific concepts as a kind of skeleton, so that while the story often meanders into scenes which don't ultimately mean much to the plot, it never feels slack or episodic, because Sandra's evolving thoughts preserve a sense of forward motion.

Unfortunately, this begins to falter as the novel winds down. There are one or two good surprises waiting, but Sandra acts far more surprised at some things than seems at all credible. One such instance I'll mention, since I'm sure it's not giving anything away: nearly 200 pages in, Sandra suddenly realizes that she's got a crush on Bennett — even though the reader has had that figured out all along, and Sandra herself has seemed not oblivious to it as much as unconcerned. Willis seems to be trying to have Sandra's infatuation follow the pattern of her other trends — developing without the participants' knowledge — but it's stretching too far. We've got no reason to suspect that Sandra's as blind as that about personal relationships (she comprehends Billy

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Ray's behavior easily enough), so it's just too hard to swallow.

But that's one of the benefits of lighter-weight material: there isn't such an investment of serious expectation built up that a problem like this will ruin the whole book. It's reasonably easy to brush over it and continue to enjoy watching how things play out, particularly with Willis's wit to pave the way. Her ear for the vocabulary and vapidity of everything trendy makes *Bellwether* a delight for anyone who chafes under the tyranny of style, and if it ties up a trifle too neatly in the end, well, so what? There's nothing wrong with a happy ending, is there?

Bradley Denton's fourth novel, *Lunatics*, presents a situation that certainly sounds like a comedy: it begins with this guy Jack sitting outside on a curb, naked in a Texas January, awaiting the arrival of Lilith the moon-goddess (he calls her Lily) for their once-in-a-full-moon liaison. But the police find him first, and so begins a year in which Jack's friends do their best to keep him out of harm's way (and jail) while indulging what they see as his fairly harmless fantasy. But the presence of the moon goddess has an effect on them, too, and before long they start to question their marriages, contemplate adulteries, and descend into premature midlife crises.

Lunatics is a very different sort of comedy from *Bellwether*. It's got none of Willis's farcicality, and at times it hardly seems comic at all, but many scenes absolutely require a humorous reading: "The kids made fart noises when Halle brought her date home," one chapter begins. More often Denton strikes a subtler note with passages such as this: "These were refrigerators that were worthy to house your bologna. These were refrigerators that made you feel safe." With moments like those, and a sense running through the book that everything will work out fine (we never doubt that), it seems that "comedy" is at least one thing to call *Lunatics*.

But this is a novel by the author of *Blackburn*, so you'd expect there's more to it, and you'd be right; though this is more the Denton of *Buddy Holly Is Alive and Well on Ganymede*—he brews a similar mixture of moods here, by turns comical and incisively observant, dispassionate and tender, goofy and profound. There's none of the violence or darkness of *Blackburn*, none of the loaded moral situations. As in *Buddy Holly*, Denton explores weirdness among

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people far more normal — or at least typical — than Blackburn the misunderstood serial killer.

Yet there are similarities to *Blackburn* here as well. Jack's something of a similar character, a holy innocent — he too approaches life in an almost childish manner, with a simple moral code that he never loses faith in. Jack possesses the same quality of purity that Blackburn had, though here it's framed as unconditional love rather than vengeful judgment.

But Jack isn't by any means the focus of *Lunatics*. He's the central figure — it's his relationship with Lily that fuels the plot, and all the other characters are linked by their friendship with him — but Denton gives us chapters from every other significant character's point of view as well, and this tends to militate against the kind of exaggerated humor of *Bellwether*. Characters who at first seem to be caricatures — Artie, the dumb-young-hunk boyfriend of Carolyn — quickly take on depth when we see things through their eyes. If Willis had given us a scene or two from Flip's viewpoint, the farce might well have collapsed.

This is one of Denton's main strengths. As in *Blackburn*, where he gave us a serial killer who we liked and even sympathized with, here he makes us feel for every one of his major characters; at first we might see Stephen as a prig and Katy as a harridan, but they quickly become complex, comprehensible, sympathetic — though, as in Blackburn's case, we don't necessarily applaud everything they do. It's a rare thing in genre fiction, where things tend to be drawn in simple blacks and whites, for characters to emerge as separate from their deeds — to transcend them, in fact — and it's what makes Denton one of the better writers in the field today.

In a sense, *Lunatics* is a comedy on the Shakespearean model — just as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not about any single character, *Lunatics* doesn't boil down to Jack's story, or Katy's, or Halle's, but is somehow the sum of them all. There's none of the mistaken-identity gimmicks or rampant punning typical of Shakespeare, but *Lunatics*, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, does center on a series of sexual liaisons made or fostered in the forest (his friends take Jack to a cabin during each full moon), under the auspices of a supernatural creature.

Which brings us to Lily, who may be the only weak part of the book. Sometimes Denton plays her wonderfully, and she tends to im-

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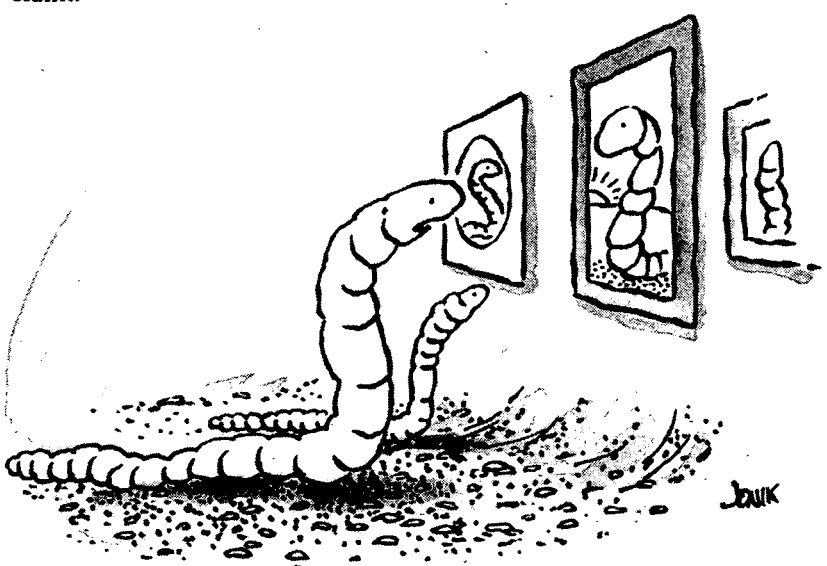
prove as the book progresses, but in the beginning and at scattered points throughout her character declines into a simple conventionality that seems beneath the rest of what Denton accomplishes here. Now and then, without any apparent logic, Lily suddenly seem thick-headed: at one point Halle makes reference to a "cherry-picker" in Lily's presence, and the goddess replies, "But what does picking cherries have to do with anything?" She only rarely shows any unfamiliarity with contemporary idiom, and why should she — she's a goddess, right? But once in a while Denton lets slip one of these jokes, and they clank.

Thankfully, such moments are few. On the whole *Lunatics* succeeds admirably, mingling its moods in a way that recalls the jumble that is real life. And it's got one other similarity to *Bellwether*, in the ending. I don't want to give anything away, so I'll just say that I couldn't decide if it was the right way to go; part of me closed the book feeling that a less perfectly happy ending might have been better. But this is my column on comedy, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ended happily, too, so "good night unto you all," and I'll nitpick the ending no more. All's well that ends well, after all.



"That's your late Uncle Rocco. He was an 'early worm.'"

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Shadow of Ashland, by Terence M. Green, Forge, 1996, 221pp, $17.95, Hardcover

TERRY GREEN is one of those hidden literary treasures. He's not particularly prolific and all too often his books are published with far less fanfare than they deserve, but whenever a short story of his appears in a magazine, or a new novel at one's local bookstore, discerning readers know to grab it quickly and then savor it with many rereadings.

A quick look at my own bookshelf shows only a depressing few inches devoted to his work, but what's there is of high quality. His short story collection, *The Woman Who Is the Midnight Wind* (Pottersfield Press, 1987), is a gem of a book without a bad story in it. *Barking Dogs* (St. Martin's Press), following in 1988, was a gritty, streetwise near-future thriller that, if it didn't precede the eventual cyberpunk movement, certainly was exploring a similar territory in its own right. Lastly came *Children of the Rainbow* (McClelland & Stewart, 1992), a contemporary novel of time travel, speculation and wonder that takes as it starting point the problems of descendants of the Bounty's mutineers, and then spreads out to encompass far more universal concerns.

Now, finally, there's a new book to add its inch to Green's section in my library, and while it's a somewhat slender volume, it more than makes up for its brevity with its quality. Loosely based on a short work, "Ashland, Kentucky," *Shadow of Ashland* gives, within just a few pages, credence to my long-held belief that Green is certainly one of Canada's finest writers, and soon to be considered one of North America's.

The plot is deceptively simple. Protagonist Leo Nolan promises his mother on her deathbed that he will try to find her brother, Nolan's

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own Uncle Jack who went down to the States during the Great Depression, sent one letter home, and then was never heard from again. Nolan's mother dies before he can fulfill his promise, but he continues the search anyway. Things get a little eerie when fifty-year-old letters from Jack begin to show up at Nolan's father's house and Nolan decides to take some vacation time and travels down to Ashland, Kentucky, the last address he has for his uncle. And therein lies the story.

For while Nolan is in Ashland, letters continue to arrive at his father's house. In Ashland, Nolan tracks down the boarding house where his uncle lived and at that point the veil between the past and present begins to unravel. The more Nolan learns about his uncle, the more questions arise.

Nolan's search for his uncle isn't all that the book's about, fascinating though it is. Nolan's also on the rebound from a failed marriage and the premature death of his son and there's a moving and insightful subplot dealing with that. The prose throughout the book is straightforward and simple, without being simplistic or flat, but at the same time, Green pens moments of such pristine clarity, so perfectly describing a mood, or a detail, that the words seem to sing from the page. Throughout the novel, characters, settings, motivations, the past, the present, all come alive and reverberate against each other, and while Nolan isn't necessarily Everyman, his struggle and concerns are universal.

Shadow of Ashland belongs in the same select company as Alan Brennert's *Time and Chance* or Ken Grimwood's *Replay*, novels in which an unexplained, and unexplainable, phenomenon becomes a catalyst for an exploration of and a deeper understanding of human nature, rather than existing for its own sake. And because of that focus on how the phenomenon changes lives and perceptions, it takes on an even deeper resonance and sense of mystery in itself. Fascinating stuff.

Mad Amos, by Alan Dean Foster, Del Rey, 1996, 275pp, $5.99, Paperback

Like the readers of this magazine, I'm in love with the short story form. It's true that when I meet a character I like, I can quite enjoy wandering through a few hundred pages of a novel in their company, but there's still something particularly intriguing and enchant-

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ing with the shorter form of story. It's not merely convenience, though lord knows, sometimes the only time I can fit in is for a short story. More, it's the sharp focus, the import everything in the story takes in terms of the final outcome, a certain resonance that every event and character can have which is far more difficult to sustain in a longer work.

Sometimes the very length is what makes the story work. Neither the gentle mystery of Barbara Kingsolver's "Homeland" (*Homeland*, Harper & Row, 1989) nor the potent tragedy of Sherman Alexie's "Distances" (*The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993) would have had the same impact at a longer length.

Short stories come in so many flavors and colors. I like the fact that short fiction is often the cutting edge — you'll find in a short story what the novelists will be writing about in two years' time. And everything doesn't have to be serious. There are times when I'm simply not in the mood to read a humorous novel, but a humorous short story is exactly the right length. Which is, perhaps, the perfect segue into this recent collection of Alan Dean Foster's "Mad Amos" stories.

These aren't Big Think stories, but they do have a worthy pedigree, being direct literary descendants of Paul Bunyon, Manly Wade Wellman's Silver John and other tall tales.

Amos Malone has mythic stature. He comes down into civilization from the mountains in the best folkloric tradition, a giant of a mountain man riding an enormous horse named Worthless, neither being quite what they seem, which of course, is half the charm. As readers we delight in how Amos speaks impeccable Mandarin among who knows how many other languages, seems to have lived forever, has a Sherlock Holmes acuity of mind, is bigger, stronger and smarter than anyone he comes up against. It's all somewhat over the top, to be sure, but that's part of its charm.

I've always felt that writers have to love what they're doing, that if they're fully engaged when they write, their readers are all that more likely to become fully engaged as well when they're reading. I can picture Foster writing these stories with great gusto, a smile as big as Amos himself stretching his face as he sets up certain situations, or writes that perfect line. It's easy to dismiss this sort of fiction as too lightweight, but considering the

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way the world turns, perhaps we shouldn't be so dismissive of something that can bring a smile to our faces the way these stories can.

I can't remember the last time I had this much fun with a collection and I know I'll be rereading many of these stories again. And if that isn't the mark of a successful story, I don't know what is.

Demon and Other Tales, by Joyce Carol Oates, Necronomicon Press, 1996, 36pp, $4.95, Trade paperback

This slim collection of Joyce Carol Oates stories doesn't fare nearly as well. Her work and Foster's are as different as apples and oranges, of course, but it's not the kind of story she writes that's the problem. Nor is it her prose or ideas.

The stories are rooted in fascinating conceits: a cottager finds the corpse of a miniature man washed up on the lake shore; policemen enter an apartment to find a dead woman, with the story told from the corpse's perspective; a woman digs up the partial skeleton of a child in her backyard and brings the bones inside where they are venerated.

Oates has a sharp eye for the pertinent detail and a literate sheen to her prose. I don't even mind her lapsing into a second-person viewpoint for a couple of stories, because she's able to pull it off.

The problem with the stories collected here lies in her characters. She doesn't seem to be particularly interested in them as people, only as contructs to forward her ideas, but the cool distance of her approach doesn't allow her readers to engage with them either. I'm not saying that characters have to be likable — though certainly most readers prefer to spend their time in the company of characters they like; it's more that one never gets any sense that they're real. When we have nothing to connect us to the characters — no sense that they have, or ever had, any life or real meaning — then we're not particularly interested in what happens to them.

This cool approach can work in small doses — especially in a story such as "Posthumous" with its deceased viewpoint character — but read in a group as the stories are collected here, the reader is left feeling put off, rather than welcomed into the author's world.

For ordering information, contact: Necronomicon Press, P.O. Box 1304, West Warwick, RI 02893.

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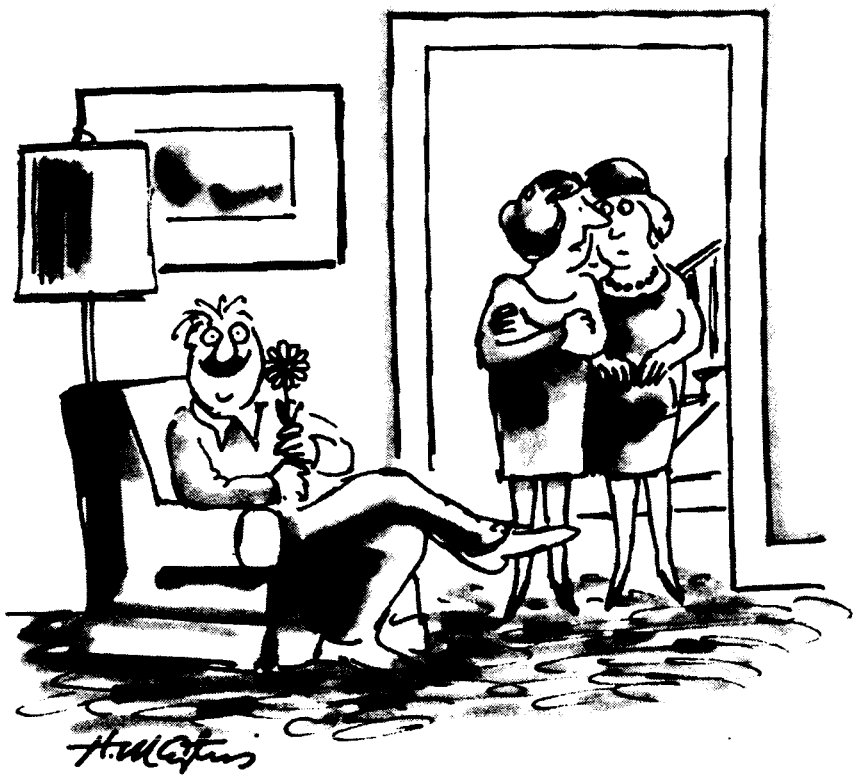
A recent letter from a reader rightly pointed out that I had made it awkward for him to order *Spyder* by Norman Partridge and *Out There in the Darkness* by Ed Gorman since I hadn't included an address for the specialty press that published them. To correct that now, here's that address: Subterranean Press at 4415 Linden Ct. #2, Flint, MI 48532.

This also gives me the opportunity to point out that, in June, Subterranean Press published *Bad Intentions*, a book-length collection of Partridge's excellent stories. Write to them at the same address for more information about it.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



"Wally always was a puzzle — on top of which, now, some of the pieces are missing."

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Brief Reviews: Books

Celestial Matters, by Richard Garfinkle, Tor, April 1996, 348pp, $23.95, Hardcover

WHAT IF Ptolemy was right, and the Earth really is the center of the universe? And what if Aristotle was right, and air, earth, fire, and water really are the building blocks of matter?

Richard Garfinkle has taken the implications of ancient Greek science to their logical extremes in a hard science fiction novel of astonishing dimension. He gives us a wide cast of fascinating characters engaged in the Manhattan Project of their day: a celestial journey all the way out to the Sun, where they will steal a piece of elemental fire to drop on their enemies, the Middle Kingdom of Asia. But a pacifist saboteur and a stowaway Middler Xi master have different ideas, which lead to an epic voyage through alternate science and philosophy.

Rigorously conceived and outrageously executed, *Celestial Matters* will leave any lover of speculative fiction with a sufficiency — perhaps even a surfeit — of sanguine humor.

Walking the Labyrinth, by Lisa Goldstein, Tor, June 1996, 254pp, $21.95, Hardcover

This marvelous and (in the old sense of the word) fabulous book combines the best qualities of narrative, epistolary, and personal journal novels. It moves back and forth in time and space from an England in the late 1800s where people are involved in the Secret Order of This or the Golden Dawn of That to present-day San Francisco, where Molly Travers is accosted in the street by a private detective who wants to ask her questions about her great-aunt.

Through letters, journals, newspaper articles, and interviews, Molly discovers pieces of her

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family's history. A troupe of vaudevillian magicians and a laundress-turned-seer are among the fascinating characters who populate this book.

Walking the Labyrinth is full of enchantments and illusions, wonders and delights, and the mysterious connections of family. A highly satisfying read!

Starborne, by Robert Silverberg, Bantam, May 1996, 304pp, $22.95, Hardcover

It is the 23rd century. The human spirit is dying. Will a starship sent out in search of new worlds revitalize humanity? While the crew spend their leisure time playing *Go* and socializing in the baths, *Starborne* centers around the *Wotan's* austere year-captain, formerly an actor and a monk. He is intrigued by graceful Noelle, a blind telepath whose link with her twin sister on Earth is the crew's only contact with home. When Noelle's connection with her sister is severed they are suddenly alone in space. She senses that an alien intelligence is responsible. Some want to turn back but the year-captain decides that the source of the interference must be explored.

What the crew of the *Wotan* discovers amidst the stars is nothing less than the rebirth of the human spirit. *Starborne* is to much of modern space-faring science fiction as Silverberg's year-captain's comparison of *Go* is to chess, "deeper and more subtle." Highly recommended.

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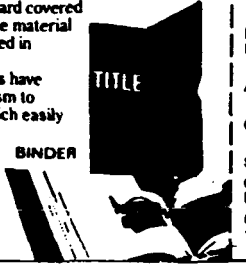

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Hugo and Nebula winner George Alec Effinger also has a skewed perspective on the world, and that perspective frequently appears in his fiction. One of his best-loved creations, Maureen Birnbaum, travels through time and space, and often lands in the pages of F&SF.

Here she takes on Tennessee Williams, New Orleans, and a few classics of the American stage....

Maureen Birnbaum on a Hot Tin Roof

By E. Spiegelman (As told to George Alec Effinger)

IT'S LIKE PRETTY STRANGE, but there have been two brilliant American writers who've lived on the 1000 block of Dumaine Street in New Orleans. One of them was your Tennessee Williams, famed in song and legend.

I was thinking about him because I was — guess where — in New Orleans on vacation. Mums and Daddy decided I really needed a change of scenery or something. I mean, jeez, my poor parents were probably going out of their individual and collective trees listening to me moan about just how terrible my whole entire life *was turning out.*

Though God knows none of it was like their fault *or anything. I mean, they've never been* anything *but supportive to me and probably wish that I'd* grow up *already and stop coming to them every hour of the day and night just because I'd had a* horrible *divorce and a son who was perfectly wonderful in almost every way except — and I've been told this is just* terribly *meaningful, and if you can explain it to me I really wish you*

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would — that he can play with unpainted wooden blocks just fine but the brightly colored ones frighten him, and also my job is the worst.

No doubt Mums and Daddy have troubles of their own — a breakthrough revelation that could've *changed my life, if I like still had one. No doubt that's one of the reasons my folks flew me to New Orleans and booked me aboard some entry-level Love Boat for ten days in the Caribbean going to islands that the National Geographic Society has never even* heard of. *I'll give you one.* Ste. Tiffany. *I was like* really *looking forward to a stopover in Springfield, the capital and chief port of the island nation of Ste. Tiffany, where the laughing, happy natives would entice me with their straw fans and mushy fruit. Duh, huh?*

So, I hear you ask, where is this like leading? *Along Dumaine toward Rampart Street, actually. It was there, on the sidewalk at 1014 Dumaine — where my guidebook told me that the second-floor apartment was Tennessee Williams's last home in New Orleans, where he hoped he'd die, but the Lord and geography had other ideas — that she did it to me, you know, yet* again. *I should've figured. No, not Mums. Maureen. Maureen Birnbaum. Muffy. You know.*

"What's happening, honey?" she goes.

Well, she hadn't changed, but that's one of the things she does best these days — not changing. I'm edging and staggering and creeping toward antiquity. I will turn thirty-years-old sometime before the end of this paragraph. Yet my old high school pal, Maureen, still looks a girlish seventeen. I'm like so sorry *if I sound a little grumpy, but how typically...*girlish *of her.*

Granted, all her racing around in space and time has trimmed a little baby fat from her shall-we-say ample hips, and she's given up smoking, but she still doesn't look, you know, like an adult. Not like a real woman, *I mean. Muffy's done a lot of too-marvelous-for-words things, if you believe everything that comes out of her mouth — and I'm not saying I do, and I'm not saying I don't — but,* jeez, *she's still never paid a month's rent or changed a flat tire or as far as I can tell, you know,* done it. *She and I are such* good pals, *of course, but sometimes I think she's really just* such a kid.

Sorry about that. Neither here nor there, won't happen again.

Maureen Danielle Birnbaum is standing on the broken sidewalk at 1014 Dumaine Street, wearing her gold brassiere and her G-string,

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schlepping her broadsword, Old Betsy, and because we're only like three blocks from, you know, Bourbon Street nobody's giving her so much as a second glance. *They figure she's probably, um, on her way to work at Le Club Hotsy-Totsy ("Beaucoup Hotsy, Beaucoup Totsy") or something equally as mundane.*

Oops, what have I said! Muffy — I mean, Maureen — would absolutely kill me for putting her in the same sentence as the word "mundane." Muffy — I mean, Maureen — is seriously fascinating *at all times.*

Just listen to her. I mean, for God's sake, if I *had to,* you *have to.*

SCENE ONE

This is the French Quarter of New Orleans, and it is three or four days earlier. We are standing on the broken and partly sunken sidewalk in front of the three-story pink townhouse at 1014 Dumaine Street. The buildings in this part of the city are more than a century old, but most have been purchased and renovated in recent years by wealthy residents and landlords. This particular neighborhood does not have the same shabbiness as is so evident half a block away in either direction, on Burgundy or Rampart Streets. There is a decadent charm here, of course, but it is a very carefully maintained decadence.

The green-painted shutters are closed over two windows on the ground floor, but a white wooden door is flung open revealing an entrance to an apartment. A young feminine figure sits in the doorway on a low step. This is Blanche; she is working with some concentration on painting her fingernails a drastic red the color of a traffic signal.

It is October 31st, Halloween, the day before All Saints' Day, an important religious observance in this Roman Catholic city. The sky is gray and threatening rain; the afternoon is cool, but summer is still lingering, winter is still weeks away. Cars and trucks bump along Dumaine Street, rattling and thumping from one pothole to the next. In the background are drunken voices, laughing.

A young woman is walking along the sidewalk. She is wearing the gold-and-jeweled garb of a mighty warrior-woman. She carries a huge

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broadsword across her back. The barbarian heroine is me, Maureen Birnbaum. In one hand I carry a small slip of paper.

BLANCHE: *[Blanche speaks with a heavy magnolia Southern Belle accent, which comes and goes.]*:

Where y'at, dawlin'?

MAUREEN:

I think I'm lost.

BLANCHE *[laughing]*:

No, honey. "Where y'at?" is a colloquial New Orleans greeting.

MAUREEN:

Uh huh. I still think I'm like lost, though.

BLANCHE:

Whatcha lookin' for?

MAUREEN:

Well, they like told me to take a bus named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at — Elysian Fields!

BLANCHE:

Somebody messin' with you, dawlin', or you got it wrong, 'cause you can take the Desire bus up Decatur Street and transfer there to the Cemeteries bus okay — you want the Canal bus on the neutral ground, the Canal-Cemeteries, not the Canal-Lake Vista — but you ride it six blocks and you're still on Canal Street. Now, you could've transferred from the

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Desire bus to the Elysian Fields bus, but you'd have had to skip the Cemeteries bus, and then you'd be riding right back the way you came. Now, if you wanted to get to Elysian Fields, you should've stayed on the Desire bus and gone past Dumaine Street and Esplanade Avenue. Then you get to Elysian Fields. There's a big old Schwegmann's store on the corner. You still got your transfer?

MAUREEN:

No. I just told the bus driver I wanted to see the Tennessee Williams house, I'm just so sure, and he told me to get off here.

BLANCHE:

This *is* the Tennessee Williams house. He lived right upstairs.

MAUREEN:

I didn't mean the house where he lived. I meant the house in the play. I wanted to see the house in the play. The one on Elysian Fields Avenue.

BLANCHE:

What play?

MAUREEN:

I don't know. The play that starts, you know, with somebody getting lost and talking about taking the streetcar named Desire and the Cemeteries line and the Elysian Fields line.

BLANCHE:

Oh, that's only poetic license, dawlin'. The bus lines don't really connect. See, it's all symbolic how like Desire leads to the Cemeteries and death and all, and death and all leads to Elysian Fields, which was like your

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typical heaven in some old religion. I forget which. I think it was *Summer and Smoke.*

MAUREEN:

The play with the house on Elysian Fields? No, like I'm totally sure that was *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

BLANCHE *[shaking her head]:*

Nuh uh, girlfriend, you're mixed up. You're thinking of *The Glass Menagerie.* I'm sure about it. It had this hussy running around in her slip. We were supposed to read that one, 'cause I went to junior college for the beginning of a part of a year.

MAUREEN:

You've got the wrong play again. The character's name was Maggie the Cat. The one in the slip.

BLANCHE:

Yeah you right. She was the title character in *Sweet Cat of Youth.* You've got it confused —

MAUREEN:

— with *Bird on a Hot Tin Roof*? That just sounds plain dumb.

BLANCHE:

I don't know. Birds on a roof make more logical sense to me.

VENDOR:

Calas! Rice cakes, hot with pecans and cane syrup!

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MAUREEN:

Well, which one did he write here? In this house?

BLANCHE:

I don't know as he wrote any of 'em in this house. Somebody else lives here now. Tom — they call him Tennessee but his name was Tom — Williams has been dead for years. By the way, my name is Blanche DuBois. It means white woods.

[She stands up and offers her hand to Maureen, but shakes her fingers when she realizes the nail polish is still wet. They both laugh.]

MAUREEN:

And I'm Maureen Birnbaum. It means pear tree. Maureen means dark, so my name means like tree of dark-skinned pears.

BLANCHE:

Uh huh. Great.

MAUREEN:

Yeah, well, I'm stuck with it.

BLANCHE *[brightening]:*

Anyway, we're both like trees, right? So we can be great friends and you can come in and wait for Stanley and Stella to get home.

MAUREEN *[her eyes narrowing a little]:*

Stanley and Stella?

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BLANCHE:

Stanley's my boyfriend. Stella for Star — she's our little Yorkie, the sweetest doggie in the world. C'mon inside in the air-conditioning. I can give you a Dixie beer or, if you're a health nut like you look like, just a Barq's.

MAUREEN:

All right, honey. You know we rugged swordsfolk are pretty big on drinking lustily, so a Dixie'll be just fine. Everybody's been so friendly here, I wonder who I'm gonna have to kill.

BLANCHE *[laughing]:*

Ha ha, you remind me of my Daddy. He was a cop, too. Just wait 'til tonight, though. The street gets pretty crazy. I'll point out a couple few folks we can do without.

SCENE TWO

The interior of Stanley and Blanche's apartment. There is only one room visible, the combination living-room and bedroom. The king-size bed — neatly made up with a purple chenille bedspread — dominates stage left. There is a small portable television set on a chair beside the bed. Behind it are two doors, one leading to the bathroom, the other to the kitchen. There is a small bookcase filled not with books, but with dozens of small glass animal figurines and two or three old teddy bears. There is also a small table and three straight-backed chairs. The room is dimly lighted. There is one small overhead chandelier; all the light bulbs are burned out except one, and that one is covered by a red paper Chinese lantern, softening the brightness of the light bulb but making it garish at the same time.

Maureen and Blanche are seated at the table, drinking beer. Blanche is drinking hers from a conical pilsner glass, and Maureen is drinking hers directly from a longneck bottle.

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BLANCHE:

If you're in the Quarter very long, Maureen, you will learn that it is a place of magic and fantasy.

MAUREEN:

I haven't seen a lot of magic and fantasy yet, sweetie, but I have seen a lot of people who've sent away for their self-images out of the wrong mail-order catalogs.

BLANCHE *[raising a hand to her throat, shocked]:*

Maureen, honey! Are you being...judgmental? *You!* I mean, dawlin', here you are carryin' a sword around with you and all. What's *that* for? To protect you from the palmetto bugs, I suppose? And I'm not even going to mention your costume, which the less said about it the better, and the more appropriate as well, tiny little thing that it is, although I won't bring it up, I won't, because I was always taught to value the *person within* and not make hasty impressions based on superficial appearances.

MAUREEN *[sourly]:*

How fantastic and magical of you not to bring it up, honey. As for my sword and my raiment — they are for sure altogether fitting and proper for a barbarian swordsperson such as myself. When peace rules, then the weak and helpless of this and every other world feel empowered to mock and belittle their defenders. Yet let a ravening horde threaten, and how quickly your tune changes!

BLANCHE *[Once again her hand flutters to her throat. She smiles coquettishly.]:*

A ravening horde? Oh my goodness, wheah? *[This time, she makes the word into two syllables.]* I must see to my hair! I must look a horrible fright. I hope they do their ravening of us here indoors, because if I'm

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dragged outside, in the harsh light I'll be exposed as a perfect shambles of exhausted loveliness.

[Maureen just sighs loudly and takes another gulp from the beer bottle. The bathroom door opens, and Stanley enters. He is not overly tall, but he is strongly built, broad through the shoulders with muscular arms revealed by the T-shirt he wears, which is white with the emblem K/S printed in large purple letters on the front. He sits at the table in the third chair.]

BLANCHE:

Well, Stanley, I'm glad you recalled at last that we are entertaining a guest.

STANLEY:

Sorry, Blanche. How are you two ladies getting along?

MAUREEN:

I don't like being called a "lady," pal. I'm a woman, confident and proud of her gender, and I make no pretenses. I don't appreciate being treated as if I'm weaker or more delicate than I am or in need of any special treatment at all.

STANLEY *[grinning]:*

Oh, so you don't appreciate a litttle special treatment? If that's so, you'll be the first one.

BLANCHE:

Stanley! You be nice, now. Well, I for one am *pleased* to be thought of as a lady. Wheah I come from, ladies are respected and prized for their qualities and refinement.

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STANLEY:

You're refined, all right, Blanche, the way they refine light sweet crude oil!

MAUREEN:

I'd get up right now and flatten your nose, buster, for talking to a woman that way, except that at the moment I feel it's better for her to learn to stand up for herself and realize that you don't have some Goddess-given right to treat her with disrespect.

STANLEY:

Is that right?

MAUREEN:

In another minute, I'll probably like change my mind and punish you, in my role as protector of all, you know, down-trodden women.

STANLEY:

Is that right? Blanche, get me another beer.

MAUREEN:

Don't do it, Blanche.

[There is an uneasy silence, during which drunken voices can be heard from outside, laughing.]

BLANCHE:

Oh, please, can't we have some fantasy around here? Some magic? *[She gets up and goes into the kitchen. Stanley shakes his head.]*

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VENDOR *[from outside]:*

Gingerbread! Pornographic gingerbread!

STANLEY:

While she's gone, I should explain — I'm not the dumb lug you think I am. It's because of Blanche. She wants a certain kind of guy, see. She wants — *[Stanley is interrupted by Blanche's return.]*

BLANCHE:

Here you are, dawlin'. Okay? Everybody friends now?

STANLEY:

Sure, we are. Say, why don't we all go bowling later?

[Blanche and Maureen glance at each other.]

BLANCHE:

We'll pass by the K-Slash-S later, Stanley. See who's there. See what's happening.

MAUREEN:

What's the K-Slash-S?

STANLEY:

A bar around the corner.

BLANCHE:

A fantastic, magical place. K-Slash-S stands for Kirk and Spock.

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MAUREEN *[looking bewildered]:*

Who?

STANLEY:

Kirk and Spock. From TV. From *Star Trek*.

MAUREEN:

Sorry. We heroic myth-figures don't spend a lot of time sitting on the couch watching game shows. We're out there every day, freeing lost cities from the grasp of mad tyrants, opposing single-handedly the murderous schemes of galactic conquerors, defeating the cruel plans of scientific super-geniuses unhinged by limitless power. I haven't had much time in recent years for popular entertainments. Except *The Planet of the Apes*. Not the book or the movies, the TV series. Remember that? That was a great show! Some terrific scripts. There was this one episode —

BLANCHE:

You never heard of slash fandom?

MAUREEN *[shakes her head slowly]:*

A bar where broadsword enthusiasts hang out? My kind of people. Sounds good to me.

STANLEY:

Not quite.

MAUREEN:

Oh, you mean "slash" as in gory, bloody horror movies? Sorry. I've seen too much of the real thing to sit around with amateurs who only like

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the pretend stuff. Let me tell you one thing I've learned: Carnage isn't pretty. And sometimes it's not as much fun as it looks, either.

BLANCHE:

The K-Slash-S is for people who like to think Kirk and Spock were actually closer than they seemed on the show.

MAUREEN:

Pals?

[Stanley and Blanche exchange glances.]

BLANCHE:

We've dropped in there once or twice. And tonight I desperately need the companionship of my own kind!

STANLEY *[standing up]:*

Me, I got to pee again. Excuse my vulgar manliness, ladies!

VENDOR *[from outside]:*

Swimps! Fresh boil swimps! By the pound, remoulade sauce extra!

SCENE THREE

It is later in the afternoon. Stanley is lying on the bed, with his head propped up against the wall on a pillow. He is reading a copy of *Soap Opera Digest*. Maureen is still sitting in her chair. Her broadsword, old Betsy, is lying across the table, and she is applying a coat of Turtle Wax to it. A radio is playing softly. When Stanley and Maureen's conversation pauses, the sounds of Easy Listening music can be heard, the kind of music that you hear in dentists' waiting rooms. Also, even more softly, there is the soft patter of an afternoon rain shower.

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STANLEY:

People don't realize it, but you can learn a lot about life from watching soap operas.

MAUREEN:

I don't see what, except maybe like, you know, how to behave when you're in a coma or suffering from amnesia. I've never *had* amnesia. Not that I recall, anyway.

STANLEY:

That's your trouble, Maureen. You're too good for everything. You're too good to watch television like a normal person.

MAUREEN:

I spend most of my life chained up in caves by horrible Neanderthal brutes inside the hollow Earth, and you wonder why I don't know what's happening these days on *Santa Barbara*.

STANLEY:

Ha! *Santa Barbara* isn't even on anymore.

MAUREEN:

Neither is Kirk and Spock.

STANLEY *[He throws his magazine across the room.]:*

Aw, just wax your sword and shut up.

MAUREEN *[She leaps up.]:*

You're next to dead right now, pal.

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STANLEY *[He gets up off the bed and faces her.]:*

I'm not your "pal," and don't forget it.

[There is a strained silence, and then Stanley lies down on the bed again.]

VENDOR *[from outside]:*

Nutria kabobs! Get 'em while they're hot!

STANLEY:

Listen, Maureen, what are we trying to prove here? I just want you to know something. I'm really a very shy, sensitive person. It's just Blanche, well, she doesn't want a shy, sensitive person. She wants a big, bellowing, belching brute. So I try to be one for her. It's not always easy, you know. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I wake up and sneak out of bed and go to the table — right there, where you're sitting — and I write a poem. I mean it. Sometimes poems just come to me like that, and I got to write 'em down. But, darn it, if Blanche knew —

MAUREEN *[looking up]:*

What?

STANLEY:

Nothing. Just don't tell her I told you that. And I've been wanting to take some classes, too — you know, out at UNO or something, some evening classes in folk dancing — and she'd probably leave me if I did that. I don't know what you think about us, Maureen, but I couldn't go on if she left me.

MAUREEN:

Well, maybe I *have* been too quick to judge. Maybe I like owe you an apology.

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STANLEY:

That's okay. I just wanted you to see how things were.

MAUREEN:

What do you do, Stanley? I mean, during the day? I mean, for a living, you know?

STANLEY:

I'm a pinsetter. In a bowling alley. Except I've been unemployed for a while now.

MAUREEN:

But they've got automatic pinsetters. They've had them for decades.

STANLEY:

I said that I hadn't worked in a while, didn't I? I hate it, but we've been living off what Blanche brings in.

MAUREEN:

And what does Blanche do?

STANLEY:

I thought that was obvious, Maureen. She depends on the kindness of strangers.

MAUREEN:

Oh. Oh! That's like absolutely the crummiest thing I can think of!

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STANLEY:

It's just that I have a unique skill that's not much in demand at the moment in the marketplace.

[Maureen crosses to the bed, grabs Stanley by the shirt and lifts him to his feet.]

MAUREEN:

Here's what's going to happen: I'm going to slap you around this room just long enough to render you stunned but still conscious. At that point I'll allow you to gather your clothes and your other things. Then, jeez, I'm going to like throw you out on the sidewalk and dropkick you all the way across Canal Street. It really seems to me that Blanche doesn't need you for a *damn* thing.

STANLEY:

Maureen, wait, let me explain. You're a real woman, and a real man doesn't see one very often. Seeing you, in that cute little bikini, with that sword, listening to the way you talk...well, I'm feeling things I haven't felt in a long time. I know you don't understand what I mean, but you've got to give me —

[Still holding him by the bunched-up material of his shirt, she pulls him across the room to the front entrance. With one hand, she opens the door. The sound of the rainfall comes faster and louder. Maureen shoves the protesting Stanley outside onto the sidewalk, then shuts the door.]

MAUREEN:

I mean, God, all men are beasts. That's the first thing a warrior-woman learns.

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STANLEY *[We hear his loud, uncomprehending screams through the closed door.]:*

Maureen! *Maur-eeeen!*

MAUREEN:

Quit that howlin' out there!

STANLEY:

MAUREEEEEN!

SCENE FOUR

Stanley and Blanche's apartment. Maureen has finished taking care of her sword. She is still sitting at the table, drinking another bottle of beer. Blanche enters from the sidewalk, carrying a heavy brown paper bag and leading the Yorkshire terrier on a leash. The light outside is getting dusky and the sound of rain has stopped.

BLANCHE:

Well, here we are, home again, Stella sweetie, little Stella for Star! *[She puts down the paper bag and releases the dog from the leash.]*

MAUREEN:

Did it stop raining out there?

BLANCHE:

It always does, you know, dawlin'. *[She picks up her bag and carries it to the table.]* Now, I don't believe I've forgotten anything. I've got the balloons, I've got the streamers, I've got the cake and the candles. What could I have forgotten? The good Lord knows I always forget *something*.

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Sometimes Stanley says I'd forget my nipples if they weren't attached. Now, let me think, if anyone *can* think in this heat and this humidity — and do you hear that noise out there? They're surely starting early enough tonight. I warned you about them, I believe I did, and now you'll see what the French Quarter is like at night. Pardon me if I predict that you'll be amazed, despite yourself and your wonderful seen-it-all done-it-all been-everywhere lifestyle.

MAUREEN:

Is there some special occasion tonight?

BLANCHE *[sits heavily in one of the chairs]:*

Oh my, yes. It's Stanley's birthday, you know. He pretends that birthdays don't mean anything to him. He pretends that he hates his birthday and that he'd just as soon forget about it. But let anyone else forget his birthday! Well! I'd just better not, that's all. He would be just too impossible to live with for days and days. So we'll just take these balloons and things over to the K-Slash-S and decorate the place up for him. As a surprise.

[Maureen doesn't say anything. Blanche digs around in the paper bag for a moment, then looks up, puzzled.]:

By the way, where is the big lug?

MAUREEN:

Oh, while you were out we had an argument. I guess like he went out for a while.

BLANCHE:

I was afraid that might happen. I thought maybe I shouldn't leave the two of you together. Stanley doesn't really understand women very well.

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MAUREEN:

I can believe that, all right.

BLANCHE:

Everything will be all right in a little while. Stanley never carries a grudge.

MAUREEN:

Maybe I should just leave —

BLANCHE *[raising one hand to her throat]:*

Nuh uh! Aren't I entitled to have some friends, too?

MAUREEN:

Blanche, I think you should know. While you were gone, your dear Stanley made advances to me. He was pretty clumsy and pretty stupid, but I understood what he meant. You don't need him, Blanche. You deserve someone lots better than him.

BLANCHE *[She looks worried.]:*

What happened, dawlin'?

MAUREEN:

Like I said, he started telling me that he was a real man and I was a real woman, but I didn't want to listen to him, so I just threw him out. Forget about him, Blanche. He wasn't good for anything.

BLANCHE:

Oh, my God. Oh, my dear Lord. Maureen, what have you *done!* How

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dare you interfere? How *dare* you judge me, or judge Stanley? What do you know about what we have together?

MAUREEN:

I...I'm sorry, I guess. I'm just so used to getting dropped into battles and other situations that are mostly black-and-white, easy to understand. I mean, you know, clear-cut good guys and bad guys. It just seemed to me that Stanley was one of those bad guys.

BLANCHE *[in a very low voice]:*

He is *my* bad guy.

MAUREEN:

It's just my firm belief that no woman really needs to settle for that. Why not the *best*, Blanche? When one woman accepts less than the best, then all women everywhere lose a little at the same time.

BLANCHE:

Maureen, for me, Stanley *is* the best, whatever you think of him. If the truth be told — and the Lord knows how infrequently the truth is told — he is better than I could actually hope for. He may not be a perfect man, I agree, but then in some ways I'm not a perfect woman. Not if the truth be told.

MAUREEN:

Now, don't be so critical of yourself. Stand tall and be proud, woman!

BLANCHE:

If the truth be told...if the truth — You know, of course — I mean, I'm sure that Stanley *told* you — that I'm not exactly what you'd call a "perfect woman." I'm sure he told you. That I'm more what you'd call a "naturalized" woman. Not the least bit perfect.

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MAUREEN:

What the hell does that mean?

BLANCHE:

It means that I'm a woman because I...went to this office and took an oath. Actually, I affirmed rather than swore. That's because I went to Catholic school.

MAUREEN *[sitting down]* :

I didn't know you could do that.

BLANCHE *[smiling, happy again]*:

Well, of course, this is New Orleans and things happen differently here. You see, we've got here what you call the Napoleonic Code. It means that what is the wife's is also what's the husband's. What he's got, I've got. In all sorts of ways.

[There is a long pause. From outside, there are drunken voices, laughing.]

VENDOR *[from outside]*:

Estofado de lengua! Best tongue in the city!

MAUREEN:

It's fantasy and magic, all right. If we're going out tonight, maybe I should put another coat of wax on old Betsy.

SCENE FIVE

Somewhat later. Stanley has returned, and he and Blanche and Maureen are seated at the table. The green shutters have been opened, the

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windows raised, and the front door opened again also. There is a great deal of traffic noise from the street, as well as the voices of passersby.

OLD MEXICAN WOMAN:

Flores?

BLANCHE:

Who is that, Stanley?

STANLEY *[He gets up to look.]:*

It's just an old Mexican woman selling flowers, honey.

OLD MEXICAN WOMAN *[From outside]:*

Flores. Flores para los muertos.

STANLEY:

No, no, we don't want any flowers. Now go away.

BLANCHE:

Tomorrow's All Saint's Day, dawlin', she's sellin' flowers to put on the graves.

MAUREEN:

You think that's the only reason she's here? She shows up in *A Streetcar Named Desire* doing that same thing, right? And where else? Think about it, Miss Junior College, think about it. Okay, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe?* Remember? George comes in with the bouquet and says "Flores para los muertos?" Like, jeez, the very same line! A quote, or a literary allusion? And Martha, in the same play, keeps saying, "Truth and illusion, George, truth and illusion." Same thing as fantasy and magic, I guess.

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[Stanley and Blanche exchange glances.]

BLANCHE:

What are you talking about, sweetie?

MAUREEN:

I mean, I think I've learned an important lesson here. I think sometimes like I come on just the *teensiest* bit too strong. Maybe sometimes I'm not exactly entirely sure of whatever situation I find myself in. I should probably be more careful in the future.

STANLEY:

Aw, we're not blaming you, Maureen.

BLANCHE:

Real life can be confusing, sometimes, honey.

MAUREEN:

As long as you guys aren't angry at me. I jumped to a lot of conclusions and said some things I shouldn't have said. I promise, in the future there will be a kinder, gentler Maureen Birnbaum.

BLANCHE:

But what about all the weak and down-trodden folks?

MAUREEN:

Oh, I'm sure I can be kind and gentle and fierce and barbaric all at the same time. It's just a matter of careful planning and sound time-management.

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STANLEY:

Then let's head over to the K-Slash-S.

BLANCHE:

Bring the doggie, dawlin', 'cause the bartender there has a cat that thinks Stella's a tribble.

VENDOR *[from outside]:*

Hot and crispy! Deep-fried watermelon on a stick!

A kinder, gentler Maureen...! That's a start, and like a good *start, if you ask me. A silent, invisible Maureen would be even better, but I'll take what I can get. I listened to her stupid story until she finished, but unlike all the other times, here I thought I could finally put her in her place. I mean, like* retribution *was at hand. I go, "Maureen, sweetie, you mean Stanley and Blanche live* right here*?"*

And she goes, "Well, in a kind of hyperspatial, too-intensely-difficult-for-you-to-understand sort of way."

I go, "Huh!"

She goes, "See, the Blanche and Stanley I *knew lived at a 1014 Dumaine Street in a completely* different *space-time continuum parallel-universe sort of thing."*

"Uh huh," I go, "so they wouldn't be there if I knocked on that white door in the pink three-story townhouse!"

Maureen just shrugged her naked shoulders. "Don't know who *lives there, honey. Somebody does, probably, but probably not Blanche and Stanley. Like I said, they're not of this Earth. If you follow me."*

I closed my eyes and sighed, then looked at my "good friend" again. "Then how did you get from there to here!" I go.

Maureen just smiled. "You know the St. Charles Avenue streetcar! Well, you take that up to Napoleon, then you get a transfer — "

I left her standing right there on the broken sidewalk. I was thinking about getting a whole muffaletta sandwich and a Coke at the Central Grocery and having lunch under the banana trees in Jackson Square.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Have Gun, Will Edit

"He writes like I used to.... I should have him assassinated before it's too late."

—Larry Niven, blurbing Stephen Baxter's *Raft*.

"Do I sound a little envious? Well, let's say that if I was fifty years younger I might have considered terminating Mr. Savage with extreme prejudice."

—Arthur C. Clarke, introducing Marshall Savage's *The Millennial Project*.

I STUDIED THE address on the business card once again, then compared it to the polished brass numbers and letters on the heavy oak door. They matched. I was impressed. The door belonged to a mansion worth at least a cool three million, or my name wasn't — well, you don't really need to know my name. Anonymity is a survival trait in my line of work.

The mansion was surrounded by two acres of manicured lawn and gardens straight out of *Architectural Digest*. A circular gravel drive carved out a grassy island, where a chrome fountain in the shape of a retro 'Forties rocket burbled gently. The whole estate was set in a fenced neighborhood where the security guards earned more than your average Silicon Valley programmer, and made the agents of Mossad look like Greenpeace wimps. After I had flashed my guy's business card back at the gates and claimed an appointment, I had been expertly frisked. I wasn't carrying a piece, since I didn't need one — yet. But a call to my prospective client had still been necessary to let me pass. (And you don't need to know his name either.)

But he had done all right for himself, my client-to-be. Not a bad place to end up in his senior years, especially for a guy who had started out writing for the pulps at a penny a word fifty years ago. He was the

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biggest customer I had landed so far, after two years in this new racket. I guessed maybe my reputation for delivering the goods was really starting to spread. The fact that my handiwork had indirectly garnered two Hugos, six Nebulas, a Tiptree, a Sturgeon and a Campbell award for my various clients didn't hurt either.

Hell, maybe if this kept up, I'd spend my own retirement days in a place like this.

I had a better chance at it than my victims anyhow. Their estates measured six feet by two by one, and were deep underground, with grass doormats and granite nameplates.

Now I rang the bell. It took only ten seconds for the door to be opened by the maid.

"Your boss is expecting me...."

She nodded and led me through the antique-laden house.

My client's study was paneled in lumber that had once sprouted out of the soil of the rainforest. Now the shelves of exotic woods that had formerly supported monkeys and macaws held arrays of the writer's awards and published volumes. It looked like a comfortable bulwark against death and eternity, and would have fooled anyone but me. I knew how easy it was to render such shoddy defenses meaningless.

The writer himself was nothing much to look at: a scrawny, self-important, balding schlump dressed in a Hermès-patterned silk robe — at two o'clock in the afternoon, for Christ's sake! He sat behind a big desk whose top bore a neat stack of papers and a lot of computer hardware. A single unmarked manila envelope caught my eye.

I figured the setup was supposed to make me go all wiggly and deferential, like. But any respect and awe I had once held for writers had been wiped out by my very first client. At our first meeting, I had caught the jerk unawares while he was masturbating as he re-read his best reviews. Then it turned out he wanted me to frag some pitiful *fan* who was bugging him.

This one must have picked up my cynical vibes, because he got real nervous. He tried to cover it up by turning his back to me, moving to a wet bar and offering me a drink.

"What will you have, Mister, uh — "

"Just some Perrier with lime," I said coolly. "I don't drink hard stuff while I'm working. Unlike some types I could name."

He decided to take offense at this, focusing a weak glare on me.

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"Listen here, Mister, what do you know about the stresses and rigors of a writing lifestyle? So what if I keep a bar in my study? I still turn out the pages. Two solo novels and a collaboration last year alone."

I took my drink from him and sipped it before replying, to keep him nervous. "I know plenty. Believe me, I've seen it all. And as for turning out the pages — well, it doesn't seem to be quite enough nowadays, does it? Otherwise, you wouldn't have called on me."

He sank despondently into an overstuffed leather chair next to his desk and wiped a clammy hand across his brow. "It's true. The competition is too fierce these days. I just can't come up with ideas fast enough. Not like I used to in my prime. It's bad enough worrying about the other survivors of my generation pushing me aside. But now there's all these young kids moving up through the ranks, nipping at my heels, invading my niche. I can't take anything for granted anymore. Why, even the critics are against me! I used to have them all on my side. But now some of them are even calling me a die — die — die — "

He couldn't say the D-word, but I could. "Dinosaur?"

He collapsed like a neophyte's shoddy plot. "Yes. That's it."

Now that I had put him in his place, I felt a little sorry for the poor little guy. It wasn't easy living past your prime, no matter what your line of work. How would I feel when I was finally outgunned? And he *was* the client, after all, the one footing the bill. So I decided to toss him a bone.

"Well, you shouldn't feel so bad, you know. It's not just you old guys who employ me. A lot of the young turks have hired me too. At least the ones who've gotten big enough advances to afford me. Usually they've got to sell at least a trilogy before I'll consider them. But it's even more savage down on their level. They're just getting started, right, and they don't care what it takes. They'd knife their own grannies just for a short-story slot in one of the prozines. Anyhow, I'm sorry if I was a little rough on you. But you can't go treating me like your agent or editor. I'm an independent contractor, a freelancer. Just like you."

In a pig's eye, I thought to myself. But what the hell, a little flattery never hurt.

Hearing this, he perked up a little. "A freelancer. Why, of course. Quite understandable.

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Why, I suppose you people even have your own trade organization, something like the Ess-Eff-Double-You-Ay?"

"Not quite so vicious. But yes, we do."

Now he was positively beaming, as if we were peers. "Very good. Let's discuss terms then. Here's the, ah, competition I would like to see, ah, removed from the marketplace."

He handed me a glossy black-and-white publicity photo.

It showed a woman.

I recognized her face from last month's *Locus*. Seven-figure advance for her next two books. Twenty-city tour for her current novel, which sat smack dab in the middle of all the bestseller lists. A lot of hype about Spielberg being interested in the movie rights, with Schwarzenegger to star.

A little butterfly of queasiness fluttered in my gut. I hadn't known the victim was going to be a woman. If I accepted this assignment, she'd be the first female writer I had taken out.

But then the butterfly drowned in my stomach acids. A job was a job. I couldn't afford to have any scruples in this line of work. It was a mean, nasty arena, and I had chosen it. If only the Feds hadn't legalized drug sales, I'd still be shaking down cheating pushers for the Mob. That was sweet and easy, compared to this writing business.

I felt cold and disgusted and rotten all at once. The least I could do to make myself feel better was to force my client to share it, rub his nose in reality a little, rattle his cage and shake his comfortable tree.

"So," I pretended to misunderstand, "you figure breaking her hands will take her out of action long enough for you to catch up?"

He squirmed. "Well, I had something more permanent in mind...."

"Oh, I get it. You want me to whack her, ice her, cut her off at the knees. A little simple wetwork. No problem. You want it to look like an accident, a suicide, or random violence? For a little extra, I can even burn her house down after I do it, or make her suffer a little beforehand."

He tossed up his hands in a warding-off motion. I think it was the part about burning the house down that got to him more than the torture stuff.

"No details!" he shouted. "No details! I just want it done!"

"Funny. I thought details were kinda your stock in trade...."

He didn't reply, but just grabbed the envelope off the desk and shoved it at me. I could tell by the thick-

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ness that it was something a lot more valuable than a manuscript inside. I didn't bother to count it. If it wasn't the amount I had stipulated, the job just wouldn't get done.

I turned to leave, but couldn't resist one more parting dig.

"Hey, you know what the Golden Age of Ess Eff is nowadays, right?"

The writer's face was the color of acid-free bond. I foresaw some heavy drinking after I left. He forced his attention away from his thoughts and back to me.

"No. What?"

"Dead."

"Honk honk honk honk honkity honk honk.
Honk honk honk honk honk honk honk;
Honk honk honkity
Honky honk honk
Honk honkity honk honk honk honk honk."

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In the past several years, Adam-Troy Castro has developed quite a name for himself, mostly as a horror writer. His cover story for F&SF, "Locusts," (February) confirmed that reputation. Now he returns with a story that's difficult to classify.

Writers deal with the U.S. Postal Service more than most people, and sometimes that can be a terrifying experience. Adam-Troy Castro, who has lived in New York and Florida, takes a look at the possible causes of such unpleasantries in "Neither Rain nor Sleet."

Neither Rain Nor Sleet

By Adam-Troy Castro

RTHUR DEXTER BRADLEY has a pale and waterlogged look, more appropriate for a soiled towel than a human being; perspiration coats his freckled forehead like a second skin, reflecting the overhead fluorescents in blinding little circlets of light. Seen in the right light, he gives off visible steam, which rises from his uniformed body like cigarette smoke, collecting near the ceiling where it merges with the vapors of the coworkers sorting letters on either side of him. Part of that is perfectly natural; the back rooms of the Mayflower Street Branch of the United States Post Office are deliberately kept cold all year long, and everybody damned to this place constantly puffs out little clouds of white. But Arthur Dexter Bradley gives off more vapor than most, because of the two layers of aluminum foil safely hidden beneath his long-sleeves and cardigan. It locks in his heat, boils his blood, keeps him from becoming a fireball capable of incinerating every envelope that passes between his burn-scarred hands. Because Arthur Dexter Bradley is a bomb.

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The tiny little woman to his left, Nancy Kaye, mumbles to herself all day long; her mad scarlet eyes darting back and forth between her hands and her tray and the next tray on her endless pile of trays still left to be done. By comparison, the hulking man to Arthur's right, Tyrone Wilson, is quiet most of the time, devoting all his intense concentration to the job at hand; the ungraceful slabs of meat that he uses as hands reduced to blurs as he swiftly and efficient delegates each envelope to its rightful place. It would be easy to mistake him as merely good at his job, unless you looked in his eyes, and saw the murderous hatred for every piece of mail before him. Tyrone wants the recipient of each envelope to die horribly. He wants them sewed into sacks with knots of anacondas, made to eat ground glass till their buttholes bleed, shackled to the rear bumpers of monster trucks and driven fast over cobblestones. Some, of course, he loathes more the others: the addressees of the Publisher's Clearing House Sweepstakes in particular. He memorizes addresses, and, sometimes, when the Space Aliens dictate, makes personal visits.

Arthur Dexter Bradley found out he was a bomb on the day he started ticking; and not merely with a heartbeat, but with a steady, clocklike rhythm unmistakably the sound of a major thermonuclear weapon. He found out he was leaking corrosive gas when he woke up in the middle of the night and saw the poisonous glowing haze rising from his skin, the ceiling above him already pockmarked with so many burns it resembled the surface of the moon. Arthur Dexter Bradley doesn't question how this happened to him, because he already understands that it's a complex chemical reaction caused by too many years of close proximity to the undetonated nuclear material near his heart. He just takes solace in his aluminum-foil precautions, and patiently waits for the next fifteen-minute break, which is when the Space Aliens have informed him will be the most advantageous time to explode.

Arthur Dexter Bradley would never notice it in a million years — mostly because the cues are so subtle that even a sane man attuned to such things would fail to notice it — but Nancy Kaye is in love with him. She has loved him ever since her exile away from the stamp counter, where she

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used to work until her constantly muttered invective drew one too many complaints from frightened customers. Nancy Kaye felt a deep abiding shame at this separation from the normal world, which she considered akin to tossing her through a trap door into Bedlam; and even as she lowered herself onto the little round stool by Arthur's side and felt the first gasp of visible breath billow between her lipstick-stained teeth, she resolved to come back in the morning with her Uzi, and spray lead until the SWAT team came to take her down, just like she had the last time. But Arthur Dexter Bradley shifted positions then, entirely without looking at her; and his arms and legs made crinkling noises, like a sandwich being unwrapped; and the invisible baked-potato gases flowed into her mouth and filled her lungs; and without knowing why, she knew that for as long as she lived she wanted nothing more than to sit beside this lovely, loving man with the aluminum foil poking out between his sleeves and pour out her heart and soul. Which she does. It's a mad heart and soul, unfortunately; one that fails to resonate with the madness of her one true love; one that Arthur has so far dismissed as typical insane muttering no different from the equally insane muttering of all the other postal employees he's ever met. He does not recognize this as the True Love that it is. But that's all right. Because the Space Aliens know, and they will impart the truth to him, at the right time. Specifically, just before the next fifteen-minute break.

The Postmaster walks behind Arthur and Nancy and Tyrone and the rest of the abused little slaves at his command, whacking his bloodied palm with a whisk. There is some persuasive reason why it has to be a whisk and not the steak knife he used to use; he's certain of that, but can't remember what that reason is, even though his palm is crisscrossed with scars and he can't move three out of the four fingers on that hand. All he knows is that the Space Aliens appeared before him in the middle of the night and suggested, nay not suggested, insisted, that if he had to indulge that little tic of his then a whisk would probably be more appropriate. And he always does what the Space Aliens say, because they're his bosses, the true masterminds behind the United States Post Office, and he owes them his allegiance both body and soul. The Postmaster used to be like everybody else; he used to be merely human. He used to come to work in a sickly blue shirt and a phallic pink tie and shoes that squeaked like dying

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mice. He used to flash a grin disfigured by the deep black fissures between his teeth. And all the mail carriers and counter help and sorters and customer service reps used to hate him, plotting various evil things to do to his white-wall radials while he was safely ensconced in his office dreaming up new ways to corrupt the business of delivering the mail. And then, one day, when he was sitting at his desk drawing bullet wounds on the lingerie models in the morning paper, the two halves of the east wall of his office just slid open, like the wonderfully accommodating doors on the original *Star Trek* , revealing, not the parking lot that should have been on the other side, but an otherwordly vortex bathed with a celestial white light. And the Space Aliens descended through that portal and said, You Are The First. And from that moment on everything changed. He still comes to work in a sickly blue shirt and a phallic pink tie, he still wears shoes that squeak like dying mice, and he still goes home at night to a wife who despises him and two kids who ignore him, and to the world at large he's exactly like he was before, but he's evolved way past the drudgery of civil service. Now, he's The Postmaster. And at the start of the next fifteen-minute break, all the world will know his wrath.

Tyrone Wilson doesn't need to hear the constant thwack-thwack-thwack of whisk against flesh to know that the Postmaster is skulking about, spying on him, plotting all sorts of evil mischief against him; he knows because the Space Aliens have told him this, not just once but repeatedly, using the mail itself. Tyrone's method of communicating with the Space Aliens is quite simple; whenever he sees a personal letter in his tray, he smuggles it home, and reads it carefully after first covering two out of every three words with the appropriate color of white-out. The secret messages revealed in this manner are always enigmatic, always disjointed, always disturbing...but usually comprehensible, in a way that can only make sense to an experienced postal worker like Tyrone. And last night's stack of letters all seemed to agree on one thing, most succinctly stated by an upstate college student's ardent declaration of "Dear I having time trouble school found ha seriously ha roommate ha gay expect work have with less ha wondering loan ha love" — a clear indication that the Space Aliens are displeased with the current Postmaster's insufficient degree of fanaticism on their behalf and are merely awaiting the proper

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moment to process his bones into glue for the back of first-class stamps. Tyrone thinks this is a dandy idea, since the Postmaster is an asshole. But Tyrone is next in the line of succession, so the Postmaster is certainly plotting to kill him in a doomed attempt to prolong his own life. So Tyrone's planning to strike preventively. Next fifteen-minute break, the Postmaster's toast.

Nancy Kaye's endless muttering has just intensified, becoming more frantic, more desperate, more ruled by mortal fear. That's because, against all odds, every single piece of mail in her overflowing tray is addressed to her — her, Nancy Kaye, who rarely gets mail of any kind, not even bills, since the hospital appointed that conservator to take care of such things for her. But today she has mail from Los Angeles and Shreveport and Albany and Raleigh and Guam: she has air-mail from South America and mailgrams from Tallahassee and even postcards from Show Low, and they're all addressed to her, and they're all addressed to her, and they're all addressed to her, and dammit, they're ALL. ADDRESSED. TO. HER. Even her keenly mathematical intellect refuses to calculate the odds of that being a coincidence. There must be a bizarre, supernatural explanation, something that pops the rivets of reality as we know it, something from if not precisely the twilight zone then at least from some neighboring postal district...and as the endless stack of her own mail parades by before her eyes Nancy Kaye succumbs to the overwhelming need to know and claws open the flap of a eight-and-a-half-by-eleven manila envelope sent to her by a pharmacist in Intercourse, Pennsylvania. The letter inside has been constructed of letters clipped from magazines: it informs her in no uncertain terms that unless she takes immediate action, the love of her life, Mr. Arthur Dexter Bradley, will be mortally wounded in an attempt to prevent Tyrone Wilson from brutally assassinating the Postmaster during the next break period. The letter goes on to say that this special warning comes courtesy of the Space Aliens, who feel Mr. Arthur Dexter Bradley to be a person of truly cosmic significance, whose life must be preserved if the universe, and of course, the post office, is to survive the truly apocalyptic days up ahead. Nancy Kaye herself is, of course, dispensable; she is to thwart Tyrone Wilson's evil plans even at the cost of her own life; but the Space Aliens go on to assure her that should she happen to

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survive this mission, they will reward her by arranging Arthur Dexter Bradley's undying devotion. The next ten letters in her stack all make the same promise. She steals a quick look at Tyrone Wilson's swift and murderous hands, cringes at the very thought of them stealing the life from the only man she will ever love, and decides: next fifteen-minute break, Wilson is toast.

And next to Nancy Kaye sits Mike Finelli, whom the Space Aliens have instructed to wire his battered jeep, even now ticking away in the parking lot, to blow up at the beginning of the next fifteen-minute break; and beside Mike Finelli sits Foster Simmons, who the Space Aliens have instructed in the fine art of reservoir poisoning, and whose latest venture in this creative line of endeavor should start taking effect in the city's hospitals at the start of the next fifteen-minute break; and beside Foster Simmons rests an empty stool which would have belonged to Elena Colton, who has stayed at home on the advice of Space Aliens to stalk the orchid society president she intends to assassinate at the start of the next fifteen-minute break; and out the door and across the hall by the sorting machine stands Ken Houghton, who has under the well-meaning advice of Space Aliens fed his college chum Greg into the front loader preparatory for a massive folding and spindling at the start of the next fifteen-minute break; and up front by the stamp desk stands Eddie Leverick, whose pretense of searching the space underneath the counter is actually a cover for loading and locking the bazooka the Space Aliens have advised him to show the folks on the express line at the start of his next fifteen-minute break; and out upon the city streets a dozen mail carriers drive around in their little jeeps twitching just a little more oddly than they have on any previous day, waiting for the moment of truth; and in all the other neighborhood branches of United States Post Office, throughout the city and the county and the state and the country, every single solitary postal employee alive awaits the moment for which the Space Aliens have so diligently prepared them; and of course they're all synchronized, to the precise same instant, roaring toward all of us at the speed of light.

And at the center of it all sits Arthur Dexter Bradley, with the aluminum foil underwear and the nuclear-reactor blood, still efficiently

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sorting junk mail by zip code, still giving off toxic steam, still showing incredible accuracy despite the imminence of the conflagration building up inside him. The big moment is now less than a minute away; there is no longer anything that can be done to avoid it; a million separate species of madness are about to be unleashed upon the world; and the Space Aliens who arranged it are already fleeing through their warp initiators in search of some other planet with post office employees. At the moment everything goes down, most of Arthur Dexter Bradley's colleagues across the country will experience hell on Earth. Arthur Dexter Bradley, who will be a free-floating cloud of superheated hydrogen ions by then, will experience absolutely nothing. But in the last few seconds immediately before his detonation, a hypnotic suggestion implanted in his brain by the Space Aliens makes him look up, and face Nancy Kaye. Their eyes meet, and true understanding passes between them. He winks. And she sticks a Nixon stamp on his nose. ☙

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Jerry Oltion is best known for his science fiction. He won the Analog *Reader's Poll, and has published more science fiction stories than he can count. His novels are also science fiction. Even his latest, a classic* Star Trek *novel called* Twilight's End, *has a hard science base.*

But every once in a while Jerry Oltion, famous science fiction writer, commits an act of fantasy. "There Goes the Neighborhood," with its magic, charms, and honest-to-goodness fairies, is about as far from hard science as any one writer can get.

There Goes the Neighborhood

By Jerry Oltion

THE DRIVE-BY CHARMING caught Mary completely by surprise. Over the years she had grown used to machine-gun fire in the night, to squealing tires and sirens and flashing lights, but the sudden fey attack was something new.

She was sitting in her recliner in the living room, re-reading her tattered copy of *Gone with the Wind,* when she heard the soft tinkle of tiny bells in the distance. Fairy bells, hundreds of them growing nearer and louder until they drowned out the television that she kept on so she wouldn't have to hear every small-caliber altercation in the neighborhood. The bells passed Mary's house like a carillon tumbling down a staircase, then suddenly stopped two doors down, at the Fraleys' house. Of course the Fraleys didn't live there anymore — hadn't for years, since the neighborhood had started to decline — but Mary still thought of it as theirs.

The bells were only a new twist in an old wound; Mary had grown used to loud cars arriving at all hours of the night, their drivers only

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staying for the few minutes it took to make a deal. She supposed it was only a matter of time before someone brought a souped-up, magic-powered vehicle by to pick up their fix. She got up to see what it looked like.

But this was no simple drug deal. In the silence, a high-pitched, piercing voice shouted, "This is for Boldershanks, ye dust-skimmin' scum!" Then came a sound like the hand of Oberon clawing the strings out of a harp, and a flash of light that drove Mary — just peeking out around the curtain — back against the wall. She blinked away afterimages of an improbably tall, slender figure with his hand outstretched toward the house, standing beside a gleaming chrome twelve-foot pumpkin on wheels, drawn by hundreds of mice.

Darkness and high-pitched laughter, then the bells began again — loud at first, then fading into the distance.

Mary had been sure her latest set of neighbors were up to no good, but this clinched it. For fairies to be involved, they had to be dealing pixie dust, the strongest hallucinogen ever discovered. Rumor had it the dust came from the dessicated bodies of actual pixies, but Mary didn't know if she believed that. All she knew was that the apparition outside looked like something straight out of the Brothers Grimm.

She risked another look. There, across the street and down, stood the result of the fairies' work: Where before a tin-sided, double-wide trailer had besmirched the weedy lot now stood a two-story Victorian complete with gabled roof, shutters, and a front porch. The yard was groomed to perfection, its grass flatter than a golf green and sporting dozens of rose bushes in full bloom. A white picket fence surrounded the whole affair. It was hard to tell in the blue glow of the streetlight, but the house looked pink.

"Oh my," Mary whispered, her breath nearly taken away by the beauty of it. She hadn't seen such a wonderful house in decades, and never on this street.

The tenants didn't share her enthusiasm. The front door banged open and all four of them rushed out, the three tuxedo-clad men cursing and waving their walking sticks at the departed fairymobile while the woman — the Slut, Mary had always called her — tugged off her full-length evening gown and flung it to the ground. For a moment she looked as if she

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were about to pull the slip off, too, but she settled for jumping up and down on the dress.

One of the men threw his stick down the street, where it bounced end over end and clattered to a stop against one of the burned-out cars near the corner. Mary wondered what they'd been doing with sticks, then she realized that until a few moments ago those had no doubt been guns, and the tuxedos and dress had been her neighbors' usual ripped T-shirts and baggy pants.

Come to think of it.... She reached into the middle shelf of the bookcase by the window and with the unerring accuracy of long practice picked up her binoculars and brought them to bear on her neighbors. They were hardly recognizable. The one with the scruffy beard now sported a well-trimmed Vandyke, and the woman's stringy black hair had been permed. All four of them looked as if they'd been recently bathed, probably for the first time in months, and by the fit of their clothes it looked like they'd been shaped up, too.

They turned away from the street and the long-vanished fairies, speaking among themselves in words too indistinct to carry all the way to Mary's ears. Then, to her horror, they began to attack the house and grounds, ripping out rose bushes, kicking over the fence, and pulling trim off the building.

"Of course," Mary said, lowering her binoculars and turning away from the window. "They couldn't be caught living in a *pretty* house."

She understood why a few minutes later when a loud car, its stereo thumping and bumping even over the engine noise, pulled onto the street, slowed down near the Victorian, then suddenly roared away and vanished around the corner with a squeal of tires. The driver obviously didn't want to get involved with someone who'd been marked by the fey.

The dust dealers renewed their efforts to destroy the evidence, but the fairies' work proved tougher than the dealers. No matter how fast they worked, the uprooted roses would amble back to their beds, the picket fence would right itself, and the house would grow back within minutes whatever they pulled loose.

When Mary looked out again in the early morning light, the house was still there, and still beautiful. And yes, it was pink; the softest, rosiest shade of pink she had ever seen.

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The police arrived not long after dawn. One of them spotted Mary peeking around her curtain and came to her door. He was a big, rough-shaven man who smelled of smoke and cologne, and he wore a crooked grin as he said, "Excuse me, Ma'am, I'm Officer Connelly from the third precinct. Sorry to disturb you, but did you by any chance witness what happened here last night?"

Mary considered saying she hadn't, as she'd said to the cops so many times before when the guns started up, but this one's obvious amusement made her pause.

"It must've been something," the cop went on. "I've seen dozens of these after the fact, but I'd give anything to watch it happen."

"Well," Mary said, opening the screen door to let him inside, "there wasn't really that much to see. It all happened in a flash. But the noise, now, that was a caution." She sat Officer Connelly down on her couch and offered him tea, and after he'd accepted a cup she sat in her recliner opposite him and described what she'd heard.

"Boldershanks?" he asked when she got to that part of her tale. He scribbled the name into his notebook with a short stub of pencil from one of his uniform's pockets.

"That's what it sounded like," Mary said, "but I could be mistaken."

"Oh, you heard it right." The cop shook his head. "Boldershanks. Wow. Your neighbors are messing with big magic. It's a wonder they're still walking on two legs."

"Oh." Mary sipped her tea. "Is he a major player in fairy circles?"

The cop flexed his fingers in an absent-minded sort of way, and his pencil pirouetted neatly over each knuckle, back and forth. "No ma'am. He was just a small-time street charmer somebody shook down for his pixie dust. But his godmother, now, *she's* not somebody you'd want to mess with."

"No, of course not," Mary said. "Who might she be?"

"You ever heard of Titania?" Officer Connelly asked.

Mary had. Long after the officer left, she stood by the window and watched as her neighbors — evidently not arrested for lack of evidence — tried in vain to erase Titania's work. They were using shovels and spray paint now, but that had no more permanent effect than their earlier

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attempts. When the queen of the fairies charmed a place, it evidently stayed charmed.

Mary looked out at her own yard, slowly going to weeds since her back had started bothering her. Her house was falling apart, too, but her social security check barely paid the taxes, let alone upkeep. She looked back at the shiny new Victorian and wished the fairies would come do the same for her.

She said as much to Flora, her neighbor, when they met at the mailbox that afternoon.

"Oh no, dearie," Flora said, resting her wrinkled hand on Mary's. "You don't want anything from the fey folk. Even when they mean good, their gifts always come at a price."

So Mary had heard, but she wasn't convinced. If Titania were willing to give, outright, a perfectly good remodeling job to her enemies just to embarrass them in public, Mary didn't see any reason why she couldn't do the same for a confidant who provided her with information on the other pixie-profiteers on her block. Mary had been watching her neighbors for years; she knew everyone's business.

REACHING THE queen of the fairies turned out to be more difficult than she expected. Mary hadn't supposed Titania would be listed in the phone book, but now that the wee folk had come out of hiding she had assumed someone in her acquaintance would know how to find one. But if anyone did, they weren't telling. Mary found herself snubbed by every one of her friends as soon as she mentioned fairies, and by the end of the day she was no closer than before.

She went to bed early, exhausted by her effort, and fell into a deep sleep. Suddenly she found herself standing in an open meadow, ankle deep in yellow and blue wildflowers, facing a throne of orange and white mushrooms upon which sat the queen of the fairies. Titania was a bit on the plump side, with silver hair that wound sinuously down to her waist, and dressed in nothing more than a bright blue scarf draped around her body. Beside her stood the unnaturally tall elf who had charmed the Fraleys' house, and surrounding them all stood dozens of dwarfs and goblins and sprites of various sizes and hues. A few pixies hovered silently

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on diaphanous wings, their arms crossed over their bodies and their wide almond eyes focused unblinkingly on Mary.

"We hear you've been looking for us," Titania said lazily, inspecting her long red fingernails as she spoke.

"Um, yes," Mary said. "I — "

"Most people don't look forward to an encounter with the supernatural."

Something in her voice sent a chill down Mary's spine, but Mary forced herself to say, "I saw what you did to the dust dealers' house on Jefferson Street last night. There's three more dealers on that block, and I'll tell you their names in exchange for the same job on my house."

Titania snickered, and her subjects echoed her like a laugh track on a TV sitcom. "We already know who they are," the fairy queen said. "We supply them with their product."

Mary gasped. "You what?"

"We sell pixie dust to your dealers. Where else did you think it came from?"

"I — I — " Mary stammered. "I thought — I've heard it comes from dead pixies."

Titania frowned, and her retinue shifted nervously. "It can," she said. "We use more...benign ways of extracting it, but some people get greedy."

"And you give them new houses for it?" Mary asked incredulously.

"We deal with them thoroughly if they actually hurt someone," Titania said, her voice ominously low. "But your neighbors were just doing a little freelance skimming on the side, so we let them go with a warning."

"Oh," Mary said. "I — I didn't know."

"Well, you do now, and you only get one warning yourself: Lay off our operatives or you'll find yourself living in a shoe."

Titania swept her arm out as if waving away a fly, and Mary felt herself tumble over backwards — to land with a thump in her bed.

She sat up, wondering if she had imagined the whole encounter, but when she switched on the lamp she found her bedspread covered with flowers. She picked up a couple of them, held them to her nose, and inhaled their sweet fragrance. Then, still clutching the flowers, she leaned slowly back against her pillow and schemed.

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The next morning she waited until she saw activity in the Fraleys' house — it was nearly ten before the dust dealers got up — then walked across the street and down and knocked on the front door.

The Slut answered it. She had ripped the sleeves off a ruffled blouse and tied the tails together below her bosom, exposing a generous stretch of shapely stomach and waist above a pair of black tuxedo pants ripped off just below the crotch.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"I — I want to talk to you about buying your house," Mary said. "Well, trading, actually."

The Slut laughed, and a wad of chewing gum flew out of her mouth and hit Mary on the chest. Mary dabbed at it with her handkerchief while the Slut shouted into the house, "Hey Frank! There's another one wants to swap for the pixie palace."

Frank stepped into the entryway behind the Slut. He had formerly been a paunchy, greasy slob of a man, but now his darkly handsome features could have graced the covers of romance books. Unfortunately, his manners hadn't been improved along with his looks. "Piss off, lady," he growled. "We've already traded with the crone up the street." He pointed toward Flora's sagging, dispirited cottage, right beside Mary's own.

"What?" Mary gasped. "You've moving next to *me*! You can't!"

"Oh yes we can," the Slut said. "By tonight we'll be like peas in a pod." She smiled sweetly as she slammed the door in Mary's face.

Mary stormed back up the street and banged on Flora's door. "How could you do this to me?" she demanded. "We've been neighbors for forty years!"

"Listen, dearie," Flora said through her screen door, "I may be old, but I'm not senile. An opportunity like this doesn't come along every day."

"Opportunity!" Mary said. "You told me you wouldn't accept anything from the fairies because there's always a price."

"That's if you ask for it. This is a straight trade, a perfect chance to pick up a charmer without any strings attached." Flora shook her finger at Mary. "Besides, you were going to do the same to me, weren't you?"

Mary had no answer to that, save to turn around and walk stiffly back to her own house.

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The next two weeks were purest hell. The dust dealers played their stereo loud enough to drown out Mary's TV even at its highest volume, and within days they had built up a new set of late-night customers who rattled her windows with their hopped-up cars. They came and went at all hours, save during the mornings, when the dealers slept in. Only then was the house quiet enough for Mary to relax, but after such long, nerve-wracking nights she couldn't sleep even so.

She kept track of her new neighbors' comings and goings, just as she did with everyone on the block, but it wasn't until they returned late one unusually quiet night that she saw anything interesting. She had her binoculars out and focused on their car the moment they pulled up to the curb, and she saw one of the men clutching a mysterious bundle wrapped in a coat. The coat wiggled in his grasp when he got out of the car, and Mary didn't need to see the iridescent blue wing slip out through the neck hole to know what they'd captured. They were going to render down another pixie for its dust.

She rushed for the door, no plan in mind except to rescue the poor creature, but she stopped with her hand on the knob. What could an old woman do against four healthy dust dealers?

She considered running to Flora for help, but even if that two-faced witch were to cooperate, they would only be two old ladies against the four. The entire neighborhood's honest population — Mary could only think of six — wouldn't be enough to do any good.

No, she needed help from another source. She locked her door again and went into the bathroom, where she swallowed two sleeping pills and stuffed the cotton from the top of the jar into her ears. Then she opened the jar of fairy blossoms that she had collected off her bed and scattered the now-withered petals over the spread, then lay down in their midst. It seemed to take forever for the pills to take effect, but she finally felt herself drift away.

The Queen was not pleased when Mary appeared in the midst of her nocturnal frolic, but she was even less pleased at the news Mary bore.

"Goldenrod, Lightfoot, see to the rescue," she commanded. Her long, skinny elf and a winged sprite of some sort both vanished in a shower of

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silvery glitter; then Titania turned back to Mary. "I suppose you want some kind of reward."

Mary tried not to wither under her intense gaze. "I — well, yes, I think that would only be fair," she stammered.

"Something like a *charming* new house?" Titania asked. "Maybe just a little bit bigger and nicer than the one your friend cheated you out of?"

Mary swallowed. "That — would do fine, yes. Provided there isn't a catch," she added quickly, remembering Flora's admonition about asking for things from fairies.

Titania smiled, showing an abundance of teeth. "Oh, I wouldn't think of it," she said. "The house will be perfect." She swept her arm toward Mary, who once again tumbled backward, to land on a soft down coverlet in a canopy bed in the most adorable bedroom she'd seen outside of a *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine.

She lay there for a moment, luxuriating in the wonder of dreams made real. Then, excitement burning away the effects of the sleeping pills, she got up to explore her new house. It was everything she'd hoped for, from the attic all the way down to the basement. She spent hours peeking into every nook and cranny, oohing and aahing at the flowery wallpaper and the elegant carved trimmery and the cabinets full of fine china, and it wasn't until dawn that she thought to go outside and check what it looked like from the street.

Titania hadn't skimped. Mary's house was bigger and more elaborate than Flora's. Than either of Flora's, since the elf had charmed the dust dealers' new residence as well.

Of the dealers themselves there was no trace, save for some pig-like hoofprints crossing the flower bed next to the street.

While Mary stood admiring her new house, Flora came walking up the sidewalk, a sheepish expression on her face. "Nice remodeling job," she said. "I like it. I like 'em both."

"You going to move back?" Mary asked.

Flora nodded. "As long as there's no hard feelings."

Mary laughed. "All's well that ends well, I always say." She threw her arms around her long-time friend. She could afford to be magnanimous, now.

So she helped Flora move her belongings back into the house next door, and they got together for lunch in Mary's new dining room, then they

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had afternoon tea at Flora's, and so on visiting back and forth for weeks on end.

Having three fancy houses suddenly sprout up on the block put a damper on the pixie dust business, so the evenings were considerably quieter than before, too. Some of the other residents along the street took a chance and renovated their houses the old-fashioned way, and pretty soon the entire neighborhood began to recover some of its former, natural charm.

And all the people there lived happily ever after, at least until the revised tax assessments arrived in the mail and everyone living on fixed incomes — Mary included — had to move away.

SPECULATIONS

THE SERVICE SECTOR WILL DEFINE HITHERTO UNIMAGINED EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES ...

long

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Ray Bradbury's writing has many moods. From the somber darkness of Farenheit 451 *to the gentle warmth of* Dandelion Wine, *his fiction runs the gamut. Lately he has returned to his short fiction roots, and published many of the stories in* F&SF. *"That Woman on the Lawn" is the latest, a soft fantasy with a sad ironic twist.*

That Woman on the Lawn

By Ray Bradbury

VERY LATE AT NIGHT HE heard the weeping on the lawn in front of his house. It was the sound of a woman crying. By its sound he knew it was not a girl nor a mature woman, but the crying of someone eighteen or nineteen years old. It went on, then faded and stopped, and again started up, now moving this way or that on the late summer wind.

He lay in bed listening to it until it made his eyes fill with tears. He turned over, shut his eyes, let the tears fall, but could not stop the sound. Why should a young woman be weeping long after midnight out there?

He sat up and the weeping stopped.

At the window, he looked down. The lawn was empty but covered with dew. There was a trail of footsteps across the lawn to the middle where someone had stood turning, and another trail going off toward the garden around the house.

The moon stood full in the sky and filled the lawn with its light, but there was no more sadness and only the footprints there.

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He stepped back from the window suddenly chilled, and went down to heat and drink a cup of chocolate.

He did not think of the weeping again until dusk the next day, and even then thought that it must be some woman from a house nearby, unhappy with life, perhaps locked out and in need of a place to let her sadness go.

Yet ...?

As the twilight deepened, coming home he found himself hurrying from the bus, at a steady pace which astonished him. Why, why all this?

Idiot, he thought. A woman unseen weeps under your window, and here at sunset the next day, you almost run.

Yes, he thought, but her *voice*!

Was it beautiful, then?

No. Only familiar.

Where had he heard such a voice before, wordless in crying?

Who could he ask, living in an empty house from which his parents had vanished long ago?

He turned in at his front lawn and stood still, his eyes shadowed.

What had he expected? That whoever she was, would be waiting here? Was he that lonely that a single voice long after midnight roused all his senses?

No. Simply put: he must know who the crying woman was.

And he was certain she would return tonight as he slept.

He went to bed at eleven, and awoke at three, panicked that he had missed a miracle. Lightning had destroyed a nearby town or an earthquake had shaken half the world to dust, and he had slept through it!

Fool! he thought, and slung back the covers and moved to the window, to see that indeed he had overslept.

For there on the lawn were the delicate footprints.

And he hadn't even *heard* the weeping!

He would have gone out to kneel in the grass but at that moment a police car motored slowly by, looking at nothing and the night.

How could he run to prowl, to probe, to touch the grass if that car came by again? What doing? Picking clover blossoms? Weeding dandelions? What, what?

His bones cracked with indecision. He would go down, he would not.

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Already the memory of that terrible weeping faded the more he tried to make it clear. If he missed her one more night, the memory itself might be gone.

Behind him, in his room, the alarm clock rang.

Damn! he thought. What time *did* I set it for?

He shut off the alarm and sat on his bed, rocking gently, waiting, eyes shut, listening.

The wind shifted. The tree just outside the window whispered and stirred.

He opened his eyes and leaned forward. From far off, coming near, and now down below, the quiet sound of a woman weeping.

She had come back to his lawn and was not forever lost. Be very quiet, he thought.

And the sounds she made came up on the wind through the blowing curtains into his room.

Careful now. Careful but quick.

He moved to the window and looked down.

In the middle of the lawn she stood and wept, her hair long and dark on her shoulders, her face bright with tears.

And there was something in the way her hands trembled at her sides, the way her hair moved quietly in the wind that shook him so that he almost fell.

He knew her and yet did *not*. He had seen her before, but had never seen.

Turn your head, he thought.

Almost as if hearing this, the young woman sank to her knees to half kneel on the grass, letting the wind comb her hair, head down and weeping so steadily and bitterly that he wanted to cry out: oh, no! It kills my heart!

And as if she had heard, quite suddenly her head lifted, her weeping grew less as she looked up at the moon so that he saw her face.

And it was indeed a face seen somewhere once, but *where*?

A tear fell. She blinked.

It was like the blinking of a camera and a picture taken.

"God save me!" he whispered. "No!"

He whirled and stumbled toward the closet to seize down an avalanche of boxes and albums. In the dark he scrabbled, then pulled on the

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closet light, tossed aside six albums until finally dragging forth and riffling pages he gave a cry, stopped and held a photo close, then turned and moved blindly to the window.

There he stared down at the lawn and then at the photograph, very old, very yellowed with age.

Yes, yes, the same! The image struck his eyes and then his heart. His whole body shook, made an immense pulsation, as he leaned at the album, leaned on the window frame and almost shouted:

You! How dare you come back! How dare you be young! How dare you be *what*? A girl untouched, wandering late on my lawn!? You were *never* that young! Never! Damn, oh damn your warm blood, damn your wild soul!

But this he did not shout or say.

For something in his eyes, like a beacon, must have flashed.

The crying of the young woman on the lawn stopped.

She looked up.

At which instant the album fell from his fingers, through the burst-wide screen, and down like a dark bird fluttering to strike the earth.

The young woman gave a muted cry, whirled, and ran.

"No, no!" he cried, aloud. "I didn't *mean* — come back!"

He was down the stairs and out on the porch in a matter of seconds. The door slammed behind him like a gun shot. The explosion nailed him to the rail, half down to the lawn, where there was nothing to be seen but footprints. Either way, up the street lay empty sidewalks and shadows under trees. A radio played off in an upstairs window in a house behind trees. A car passed, murmuring, at a far intersection.

"Wait, he whispered. "Come back. I shouldn't have *said* — "

He stopped. He had said nothing, but only *thought* it. But his outrage, his jealousy?

She had felt that. She had somehow heard. And now...?

She'll never come back, he thought. Oh God!

He sat on the porch steps for a while, quietly biting his knuckle.

At three in the morning, in bed, he thought he heard a sigh and soft footsteps in grass, and waited. The photo album lay closed on the floor. Even though it lay shut, he could see and know her face. And it was utterly impossible, utterly insane.

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His last thought before sleep was: ghost.

The strangest ghost that ever walked.

The ghost of someone dead.

The ghost of someone who died very old.

But somehow came back not as her old self.

But a ghost that was somehow young.

Weren't ghosts always, when they returned, the same age as when they died?

No.

Not this one anyway.

"Why...?" he whispered.

And dream took over the whisper.

ONE NIGHT passed and then another and another, and there was nothing on the lawn but the light of a moon that changed its face from outright stare to half-grimace.

He waited.

The first night a more than ordinarily casual cat crossed the yard at TWO A.M.

The second night a dog trotted by, wearing his tongue half out of his mouth like a loosely tied red cravat, smiling at trees.

The third night a spider spent from twelve-twenty-five until four A.M. building a baroque clockface on the air between lawn and trees, which a bird broke in passing at dawn.

He slept most of Sunday and awoke with a fever that was not an illness at dusk.

Late in the twilight of the fifth day, the color of the sky somehow promised her return as did the way the wind leaned against the trees and the look of the moon when it finally rose to set the scene.

"All right," he said, half-aloud. "*Now.*"

But at midnight, nothing.

"Come on," he whispered.

One o'clock, nothing.

"You must," he thought.

No, you *will.*

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He slept for ten minutes and woke suddenly at two-ten knowing that when he went to the window —

She would be there.

She was.

At first, he didn't see her, and groaned, and then, in the shadow of the great oak far out on the edge of the lawn he saw something move, and one foot came out, and she took a step and stood very still.

He held his breath, quieted his heart, told himself to turn, walk and take each step down with precision, numbering them, fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, moving in darkness with no rush, six, five, four, and at last one. He opened the front screen door with only a whisper, and was on the porch without frightening what might be out beyond waiting for him.

Quietly, he moved down the porch steps to the edge of the lawn, like one who stands on the rim of a pond. Out in the center of that pond, the young woman stood, trapped like someone on thin ice that might at any moment break and drop her through.

She did not see him. And then...

She did a thing that was a signal. Tonight her hair was fixed in a knot at the back of her head. She lifted her white arms in a gesture and with one touch of her fingers, a touch of snow, loosened her hair.

It fell in a dark banner, to blow and re-pattern itself across her shoulders which trembled with their shadows.

The wind stirred her hair in the night and moved it about her face and on her uplifted hands.

The shadows laid down by the moon under every tree leaned as if called by the motion.

The entire world shifted in its sleep.

The wind blew as the young woman waited.

But no footsteps sounded along the white sidewalks. No front doors opened far down the street. No windows were raised. No motion caused front porches to creak and shift.

He took another step out onto the small meadow of night.

"Who are you — ?" she gasped, and stepped back.

"No, no," he said softly. "It's all right."

Another trembling had taken over her body. Where before it had been

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some hope, some anticipation, now it was fear. One hand stopped her hair from blowing, the other half-shielded her face.

"I'll stand right here," he said. "Believe me."

She waited a long while, staring at him until her shoulders relaxed and the lines around her mouth vanished. Her whole body sensed the truth of his words.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I don't either."

"What are you doing here?"

"I don't know."

"What am *I* doing here?"

"You came to meet someone," he said.

"Did I?"

The town clock struck three in the morning far away. She listened to it, her face shadowed by the sound.

"But it's so late. People don't walk around late on front lawns!"

"They do if they *must*," he said.

"But why?"

"Maybe we can find out, if we talk."

"About what, *what*?!"

"About why you're here. If we talk long enough we may know. I know why I'm here, of course. I heard you crying."

"Oh, I'm so ashamed."

"Don't be. Why are people ashamed of tears? I cry often. Then I start laughing. But the crying must come first. Go ahead."

"What a strange man you are."

Her hand fell away from her hair. Her other hand moved away so her face was illuminated by a small and growing curiosity.

"I thought I was the only one who knew about crying," she said.

"Everyone thinks that. It's one of those little secrets we keep from each other. Show me a serious man and I'll show you a man who has never wept. Show me a madman and I'll show you a man who dried his tears a long time ago. Go ahead."

"I think I'm done," she said.

"Any time, start over."

She burst out a tiny laugh. "Oh, you *are* strange. Who are you?"

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"We'll come to that."

She peered across the lawn at his hands, his face, his mouth, and then at his eyes.

"Oh, I *know* you. But from *where*?!"

"That would spoil it. You wouldn't believe, anyway."

"I would!"

Now it was his turn to laugh quietly. "You're very young."

"No, nineteen! *Ancient*!"

"Girls, by the time they go from twelve to nineteen are full of years, yes. I don't know; but it must be so. Now, please, why are you out here in the middle of the night?

"I — " She shut her eyes to think in on it. "I'm waiting."

"Yes?"

"And I'm sad."

"It's the waiting that makes you sad, yes?"

"I think, no, yes, no."

"And you don't quite know what you're waiting for?".

"Oh, I wish I could be sure. All of me's waiting. I don't know, *all* of me. I don't understand. I'm impossible!"

"No, you're everyone who ever grew up too fast and wanted too much. I think girls, women, like you have slipped out at night since time began. If it wasn't here in Green Town, it was in Cairo or Alexandria or Rome or Paris in summer, anywhere there was a private place and late hours and no one to see, so they just rose up and out, as if someone had called their name — "

"I was called, yes! that's *it*! Someone *did* call my name! It's *true*. How did you know? Was it *you*! "

"No. But someone we both know. You'll know his name when you go back to bed tonight, wherever that is."

"Why, in that house, behind you," she said. "That's my house. I was born in it."

"Well," he laughed, "so was *I*."

"You? How can that be? Are you sure?"

"Yes. Anyway, you heard someone calling. You had to come out — "

"I did. Many nights now. But, always, no one's here. They *must* be there, or why would I hear them?"

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"One day there'll be someone to fit the voice."

"Oh, don't joke with me!"

"I'm not. Believe. There will be. That's what all those other women heard in other years and places, middle of summer, dead of winter, go out and risk cold, stand warm in snow banks and listen and look for strange footprints on the midnight snow and only an old dog trotting by all smiles. Damn, damn."

"Oh, yes, damn, damn." And her smile showed for a moment, even as the moon came out of the clouds and went away. "Isn't it silly?"

"No. Men do the same. They take long walks when they're sixteen, seventeen. They don't stand on lawns, waiting, no. But my god how they *walk*! Miles and miles from midnight until dawn and come home exhausted and explode and die in bed."

"What a shame that those who stand and wait and those who walk all night can't — "

"Meet?"

"Yes, don't you think it's a shame?"

"They *do*, finally."

"Oh, no, I shall never meet anyone. I'm old and ugly and terrible and I don't know how many nights I've heard that voice making me come here and there's nothing and I just want to die."

"Oh, lovely young girl," he said, gently. "Don't die. The cavalry is on its way. You will be saved."

There was such certainty in his voice that it made her glance up again, for she had been looking at her hands and her own soul in her hands.

"You *know*, don't you?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You truly *know*? You tell the *truth*?"

"Swear to God, swear by all that's living."

"Tell me more!"

"There's little more to tell."

"Tell me!"

"Everything will be all right with you. Some night soon, or some day, someone will call and they'll really be there when you come to find them. The game will be over."

"Hide and seek you mean? But it's gone on too long!"

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"It's almost over, Marie."

"You know my name!"

He stopped, confused. He had not meant to speak it.

"How did you know, who are you?" she demanded.

"When you get back to sleep tonight, you'll know. If we say too much, you'll disappear, or I'll disappear. I'm not quite sure which of us is real or which is a ghost."

"Not me! Oh, surely not me. I can feel myself. I'm here. Why look!" And she showed him the remainder of her tears brushed from her eyelids and held on her palms.

"Oh, that's real all right. Well then, dear young woman, I must be the visitor. I come to tell you it will all go right. Do you believe in special ghosts?"

"Are you *special*?"

"One of us is. Or maybe both. The ghost of young love or the ghost of the unborn."

"Is that what *I* am, *you* are?"

"Paradoxes aren't easy to explain."

"Then, depending on how you look at it, you're impossible, and so am I."

"If it makes it easier, just think I'm not really here. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I think I do."

"It comes to me to imagine then that there are special ghosts in the world. Not ghosts of dead people. But ghosts of want and need or I guess you might say desire."

"I don't understand."

"Well, have you ever lain in bed late afternoons, late nights and dreamed something so much, awake, you felt your soul jump out of your body as if something had yanked a long pure white sheet straight out the window? You want something so much, your soul leaps out and follows, my god, fast?"

"Why...yes. Yes! "

"Boys do that, men do that. When I was twelve I read Burrough's Mars novels. John Carter used to stand under the stars, hold up his arms to Mars and ask to be taken. And Mars grabbed his soul, yanked him like an aching

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tooth, across space, and landed him in dead Martian seas. That's boys, that's men."

"And girls, women?"

"*They* dream, yes. And their ghosts come out of their bodies. Living ghosts. Living wants. Living needs."

"And go to stand on lawns in the middle of winter nights?"

"That's about it."

"Am I a ghost then?"

"Yes, the ghost of *wanting*; so much it kills but doesn't kill you, shakes and almost breaks you."

"And you?"

"I must be the answer-ghost."

"The answer-ghost. What a funny name!"

"Yes. But you've *asked* and I know the *answer*."

"Tell me!"

"All right, the answer is this, young girl, young woman. The time of waiting is almost over. Your time of despair will soon be through. Very soon now, a voice will call and when you come out, both of you, your ghost of want, and your body with it, there will be a man to go with the voice that calls."

"Oh, please don't tell me that if it isn't true!" Her voice trembled. Tears flashed again in her eyes. She half-raised her arms again in defense.

"I wouldn't dream to hurt you. I only came to tell."

The town clock struck again in the deep morning.

"It's late," she said.

"Very late. Get along now."

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"You don't need to know any more."

The last echoes of the great clock faded.

"How strange," she murmured. "The ghost of a question, the ghost of an answer."

"What better ghosts can there be?"

"None that I ever heard of. We're twins."

"Far nearer than you think."

She took a step, looked down, and gasped with delight. "Look, oh, look. I *can* move!"

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"Yes."

"What was it you said, boys walk all night, miles and miles."

"Yes."

"I could go back in, but I can't sleep now. I must walk, too."

"Do that," he said, gently.

"But where shall I *go*?"

"Why," he said, and he suddenly knew. He knew where to send her and was suddenly angry with himself for knowing, angry with her for asking. A burst of jealousy welled in him. He wanted to race down the street to a certain house where a certain young man lived in another year and break the window, burn the roof. And yet, oh, yet if he *did* that!?

"Yes?" she said, for he had kept her waiting.

Now, he thought, you must tell her. There's no escape.

For if you don't tell her, angry fool, you yourself will never be born.

A wild laugh burst from his mouth, a laugh that accepted the entire night and time and all his crazed thinking.

"So you want to know where to go?" he said, at last.

"Oh, yes!"

He nodded his head. "Up to that corner, four blocks to the right, one block to the left."

She repeated it quickly. "And the final number?!"

"Eleven Green Park."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" She ran a few steps, then stopped, bewildered. Her hands were helpless at her throat. Her mouth trembled. "Silly. I hate to leave."

"Why?"

"Why, because...I'm afraid I'll never see *you* again!"

"You will. Three years from now."

"Are you sure?"

"I won't look quite the same. But it'll be me. And you'll know me forever."

"Oh, I'm glad for that. Your face *is* familiar. I somehow know you well."

She began to walk slowly, looking over at him as he stood near the porch of the house.

"Thanks," she said. "You've saved my life."

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"And my own along with it."

The shadows of a tree fell across her face, touched her cheeks, moved in her eyes.

"Oh, lord! Girls lie in bed nights listing the names for their future children. Silly. Joe. John. Christopher. Samuel. Stephen. And right now, Will." She touched the gentle rise of her stomach, then lifted her hand out half way to point to him in the night. "Is your name Will?"

"Yes."

Tears absolutely burst from her eyes.

He wept with her.

"Oh, that's fine, fine," she said, at last. "I can go now. I won't be out here on the lawn anymore. Thank God, thank *you*. Goodnight."

She went away into the shadows across the lawn and along the sidewalk down the street. At the far corner he saw her turn and wave and walk away.

"Goodnight," he said, quietly.

I am not born yet, he thought, or she has been dead many years, which is it? which?

The moon sailed into clouds.

The motion touched him to step, walk, go up the porch stairs, wait, look out at the lawn, go inside, shut the door.

A wind shook the trees.

The moon came out again and looked upon a lawn where two sets of footprints, one going one way, one going another in the dew, slowly, slowly, as the night continued, vanished.

By the time the moon had gone down the sky there was only an empty lawn and no sign, and much dew.

The great town clock struck six in the morning. Fire showed in the east. A cock crowed.

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Gary Couzens read English at Southampton University and now works for British Telecom. He has sold stories and fiction to various British magazines, but his only U.S. appearances have been in F&SF.

He returns with "Half-Life." About the story, he writes, "the inspiration was a challenge to write a story about someone who was dead before the story began. Originally, it was written in the first person, but it was one of those stories where I couldn't put my finger on what was unsatisfactory. Then I had the idea of changing it to second person, and it clicked. It's the logical person to use, really, as it's a story told from the viewpoint of someone who doesn't exist in the accepted sense of the word."

Half-Life

By Gary Couzens

JUST NOW MIRIAM, YOUR wife — no, your widow — walked through you. She was vacuuming the hall carpet, and she went back and forth through the spot where you died.

You don't feel the cold, though January frost is on the ground outside. Come the summer, you won't feel the warmth either. By then Miriam will be gone, though you'll still be here.

Eat sensibly, they said. Take plenty of exercise. But everybody has 20/20 hindsight. When you felt the chest pains, you knew your time had come. A little part of you welcomed the inevitable. You were forty-five years old.

Is your soul forty-five? Or is it timeless? Maybe the latter, though there's no way of telling. You speak to no one, and you have to answer your own questions.

Tick tick tick. The bleep of digital watches. Time is a treadmill. And now you're off it. You don't feel time passing. The clock hands turn, the

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leaves brown and fall, the ground is covered in white that melts to gray, but it's just a spectacle to you. You don't feel time's throb in your blood. You've shed the past and you have no future. A continuous present tense.

Miriam is on the phone to John, the elder of your two children.

"I don't know," she's saying. "I did tell him to look after himself. But he wouldn't listen.... Yes, I suppose you could call him pigheaded. I'd rather put it that he knew his own mind.... Well, it's too late to do anything about it *now*."

The *now* is elongated, louder than the rest of the sentence. You watch as her face creases and she covers it with her hand. Her shoulders shake with dry sobs. Her eyes are red from crying.

This is your world.

You wander from the hallway into the kitchen, dining room and the study at the back. In another direction is the front room.

You can't leave the house. You're at your strongest in the hallway, where you died. If you roam the house, day or night (you don't sleep) you sense some loss of energy the further you move away from that spot. But you can't go out the back door. It's as if your house, your home, the network of associations it has amassed from your twenty years living inside it, holds you together. As if you're imprinted on it. You can't leave it: you've tried. Outside you'd simply disperse, scatter like ashes on the wind.

From the hallway you go upstairs onto the landing. Straight ahead is the bathroom. To your right is John's old room, then Georgina's, your daughter who's only recently left home. You were going to redecorate her room. Then there's the room you shared with Miriam for twenty years.

It's eleven at night, and Miriam is undressing for bed. You watch her put her clothes away, folding them with the instinctive neatness you used to envy. The woman you loved for twenty years or more is naked in front of you, and you feel nothing. You watch her pull a nightdress on over her head, smooth it down over her hips. She climbs into bed, puts on her glasses to read. But she can't concentrate, it seems, so she puts the book away and turns out the light.

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Miriam answers the doorbell. On the step is Georgina in a pale orange padded coat, a scarf wrapped around her neck. When she speaks, her breath is visible; her cheeks are red. "Hi, Mum!" she says, and they embrace. On Georgina's right is a taller woman with long dark hair; she flashes a nervous smile.

"Mum, this is Sue," says Georgina.

"Oh yes," says Miriam. "Your..."

"The word is lover, Mum!" Georgina laughs.

Miriam invites them inside and takes their coats. Georgina has had her mouse-brown hair permed since you last saw her. You often wondered at her lack of boyfriends in the past, but didn't presume to ask her: she's always been attractive (if a bit on the short side) and looks especially good in leggings, which she's wearing at this moment. Now you know.

Later in the evening, Georgina says: "You remember when I told you I was a lesbian? Five years ago it was, now. Time flies." She and Sue are holding hands.

"How can I forget? It came as a total surprise."

"Did you ever tell Dad?"

"No, I didn't. I always said it was for you to do that."

"I never did. I was always meaning to. It's too late now. I—I...I know this sounds silly, but I had no idea how he'd react."

"Were you scared of him?"

A long pause. "I suppose you could say that."

"You shouldn't have been. He always thought very highly of you. In fact, he often asked me why he never saw you with a boyfriend."

"Well, he never bloody asked *me*!" Georgina's face is flushed; she gesticulates wildly with her cigarette in her right hand. "I'd have told him why if he'd asked! I've known since I was bloody ten!"

Sue looks on, not wanting to take part in this family altercation.

"You should have told him, Georgina," says Miriam.

Georgina is crying now. "It's not my bloody fault! It's his, for being so bloody distant!" She coughs, dabs at her eyes with her handkerchief. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

It's two in the morning. You look down at Georgina and Sue, sleeping in your bed. Miriam has given it to them: they need the space, not her.

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Miriam is in Georgina's old single bed.

Georgina lies on her side and so does Sue, facing the same direction, molding her body round Georgina's.

You do feel something.

You feel pain.

I'm sorry, Georgina, you want to say.

But there's no one to hear those words, asleep or awake.

THE NEXT morning John and his wife Donna arrive. Today is your funeral. Another family occasion. The last one was John and Donna's wedding. Donna's dress is rounded out at the abdomen. You were told you were to be a grandfather. You felt the pride you'd felt when he helped you from an early age in the garden or with the car; that pride when he grew up tall and strong, when he started to bring girlfriends home. You remember the evening when you came home one night (Miriam and Georgina were away) to find John and a girlfriend kissing and embracing on the front room settee, clothes loosened, oblivious. You smiled and closed the door, leaving them be. All that is in the past.

But now you'll never see your grandchild.

Miriam, John, Donna, and Georgina kiss and embrace. John is pale and drawn; Donna, on the other hand, is blithe, the only one capable of smiling. Although she was always friendly to you (you always found her attractive, from the time when John first introduced her to you), she is perhaps most distant from today's event and with her pregnancy is otherwise preoccupied. Or simply putting on a brave face.

John and Donna shake Sue's hand. Perhaps it wasn't wise for Georgina to bring her; she's out of place. But maybe their entwined roots go deeper, and her function here is to give Georgina support. And the time she does that is when they're together alone.

Miriam serves them all tea, then goes to change into her funeral dress, black with a veil. She climbs into the front passenger seat of John's car, Donna, Georgina and Sue crowding into the back. John starts the car.

The house is empty.

You are alone.

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You do not know what will happen.

Have you been fated to last as long as the funeral? Will the action of putting your body in the ground, food for worms, put your soul at rest? You look at the lounge clock. They must be burying you about now. But you feel no dissolution of energy. Or will you just simply vanish, to go — where? And where are the other dead?

You don't know.

After the funeral, Miriam hosts your wake. In this room are people you haven't seen for years, distant relatives, old friends, some of them dating from your school days. How they've changed: put on weight, acquired lines, thinning hair. Parents and even, in some cases, grandparents. You listen to the conversation. How sudden, how unexpected, what a sad day. But further away, out of the earshot of your immediate family, darker notes are sounded: how you brought it upon yourself, didn't look after yourself, asking for a heart attack. They talk about Georgina too: how could she bring her lesbian lover to an occasion like this? Another comes to her defense: her father was very strict, took the news of her lesbianism very hard.

It's not true! you want to shout. *I didn't know about it!*

You want to cry, but no tears come. It's like you're watching a film; you can't change what you see. *I didn't know. I tried my best. You can't ask more than that. No one can.*

In the center of the room, Miriam stands next to John, talking to her sister Andrea.

"So what do you plan to do?" says Sue.

"I'm going to stay with John and Donna for a while. They might need my help, what with the baby and everything." John puts his arm about her shoulder. "This place I'm going to sell, find something smaller. This is too big for me, and there are too many...memories."

A FOR SALE sign has appeared in the garden. John is helping Miriam pack her belongings into his car. Many items will be sold, as she won't have room for them in her new home; she's left a forwarding address by the telephone.

Finally Miriam is ready to go. The last suitcase is packed; the last box has been filled.

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"Have you got everything, Mum?" says John.

"Yes, I think so." There's a slight quaver in her voice.

"Just one final look round?"

Miriam blinks. "Yes."

You follow her as she walks round one last time. She and John have done a thorough job: the house is bare. Nothing has been left behind.

Except for you.

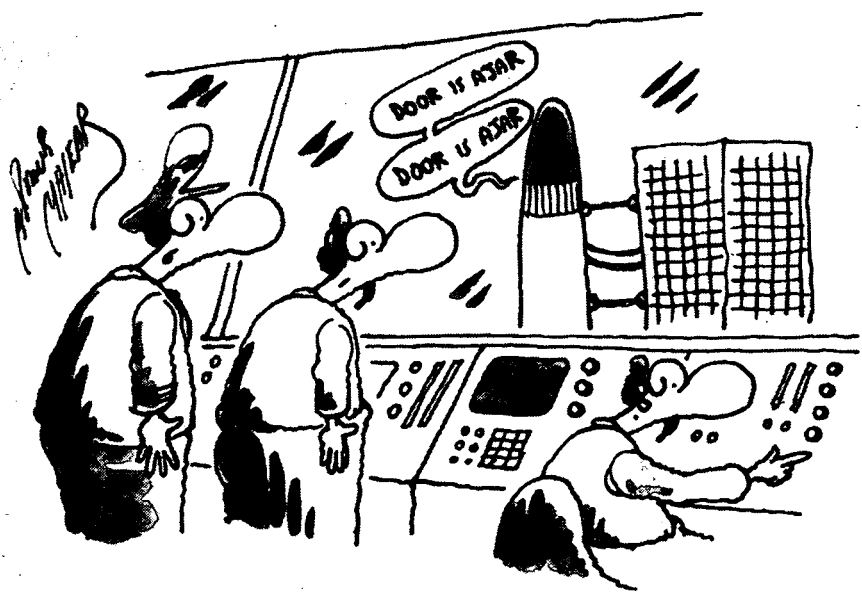
As she stands on the doorstep, ready to leave, you reach out and touch her on the shoulder.

She looks up. Did she feel your touch? She mouths two words. And then she is gone. You hear the car turning on the gravel.

Like a radioactive isotope, you have a half-life. Eventually you will decay and die a second time.

Good-bye, she said. And then she said your name. ☙

For Valerie Thame, with thanks



"Oh no, not another aborted mission!"

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Dave Bischoff has published so many short stories that he no longer counts them, and a year or so ago, he passed the fifty-novel mark. He has also worked in television, and often travels between his home in Oregon and Los Angeles.

"'Fade' started," he writes, "when I actually sat for awhile in the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel. I was with a couple of writer friends and we were headed for a party. I was dressed in a tux shirt and bow tie, just for fun. At a table across from us, one of the most beautiful young women I have ever seen was sitting with several older men. She was either a model or an actress or both.... She gave me the eye and she smiled at me in an alluring fashion. I don't know if she thought I was a producer, or honestly liked my looks, but it really didn't matter. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.... She smiled at me on the way out, and started this story in my fantasies.

"LA, of course, had been working on my nightmares long before."

Fade

By David Bischoff

THE THOUSANDS OF houses papered across the basin and creeping up the mountains and teetering over the bay. The gray film of smog. The Pacific beyond, sun bright with faded promise.

He was approaching LA, now.

He was excited.

The smacking of rubber on concrete sent a jolt up his spine. Anticipation and claustrophobia made him snap his seatbelt and sit on seat edge as the DC-10 taxied to the USAir terminal. The engagement with the loading dock seemed to take forever. When he finally got off, after the press of bodies squeezing into the aisle, the dry feel of the sunny air touched him, relieving him of that last bit of Minneapolis winter chill. (Seventy-nine degrees, the pilot had announced. Seventy-nine degrees sitting on the brilliant freeways, the swaybacked palms.) He finally relaxed enough to allow himself the possibility this wasn't a dream, this was real.

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A big movie studio was going to make a movie out of one of his books and he was going to write the screenplay.

Well, the first draft, anyway. He knew enough of the way show business worked that he wasn't expecting the finished project to be his vision. It was like Raymond Chandler said when asked if he thought that Hollywood ruined his books. Of course not, he'd say — there they are right there on the shelf, just the way I want them.

There was a guy in tennis shoes and an Angels baseball cap with a sign that read DENNIS MACKE, holding it so the people who disembarked could read it. Sunglasses, too. Chewing gum.

"Hi, that's me."

"Hey. Welcome." Easy handshake. "You got luggage?"

He had luggage, yes. The guy took his carry-on bag, but Dennis hung on to his notebook computer. He'd done a little work on the new book on the plane and hoped to do more in LA. They went down to the first level, snagged the luggage, showed the baggage tickets to the lady by the exit and trundled the cart on out to the car.

It was a limo. "Hop in, make yourself a drink, watch MTV, whatever." The driver's name was Gary. "They must like this book of yours, huh?"

"Yes. They paid me much more than I got for it from Random House."

"Great." The luggage got tossed in the back and the driver grinned. "I got a screenplay. Maybe we can make a book out of it."

The traffic was awful and so was the screenplay, but by the time the limo pulled up to the Beverly Hills Hotel and Gary the driver ticked off all the things he could procure for him, Dennis decided to give him the benefit of the doubt and promised to read the whole thing in his room.

He'd never been to LA before, so the blasting green of Beverly Hills and the voluptuous pink of the hotel made him giddy and grinny. The bellhop took him to his suite, popped his champagne cork and promised a primo table at the Polo Lounge. No tip necessary, thanks — the Twentieth Century Lion was paying for *everything*. Say, you know, I write too....

With another screenplay reading promised, the bubbles of the Brut tingling his nostrils, Dennis sat on his balcony overlooking a pool of bikinis and he breathed in this magisterial city of sun and success. There

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were strange aromas in the air, flower smells foreign to him. Laughter tinkled somewhere like bells and there was a plume of exhaust and burn of rubber as a Ferrari rammed from the parking lot into the hard gleam of the rolling city.

The phone rang. It was the studio, was he okay, was he up for that meeting tomorrow, no problem to take an extra day to relax first by the pool. No, he said. Tomorrow was okay. Tickets to a show? No problem. You've got the limo tonight or maybe you'd like us to rent you a Beamer.

He took the BMW since the limo made him feel really strange. A Swedish boy from the midwest liked the feel of a wheel in his hands, the freedom of solitude with which to cruise the foreign streets. He took the two tickets for the show at the Henry Fonda Theater. A comedy with a couple of movie stars dabbling in the stage. Would Friday night's performance be okay? Great, just great — and we can get you a date too, if you'd like. Male or female? Female, please. We've got a secretary down here dying to see that play and loved your books. She's a knockout. You'll have fun.

And Dennis said he felt fine, that tomorrow's meeting was still okay and that he was really looking forward to it.

Super, said the Exec. Wash up, relax, enjoy. The limo will be waiting for you at eleven tomorrow morning. Welcome to Los Angeles!

He took a long shower, changed into something fresh and colorful and appropriate and went down to that table at the Polo Lounge. When he gave his name to the maître d', a frown turned into a big smile and he was seated at a small empty table. A waiter elbowed through the tinkling jazz piano almost immediately and took his order for a hell-why-not-a-martini-please. The drink came to him perfect, fresh and delightful, three big California olives skewered on a stick resting in the glass.

Through the windows and the touch of gin, he looked out on the palms and the flowers and thought: the light, the smells, the sounds — it's all different here. Beautiful and charming.

Since he was alone, he could not help but notice the conversation in the booth adjacent from him. Not complete sentences, just snatches of words...

" — photoshoot — "

" — Q rating — "

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" — cover story — "

" — entertainment — "

They were like notes of music, hanging in the air, implying some unheard but fabulous symphony. Sitting across from him, a wing of hair over one eye like a young Veronica Lake, was one of the most beautiful women that Dennis had ever seen. She had on a tight dress that spoke of perfect curves and although he could not smell her perfume, one look at her perfect face synthesized it in his mind: a pheromone phenomenon. Next to her was an older man. His stubby fingers were spread on her thigh like a squashed bug as he spoke to the other people at the table. From time to time the woman's eyes would drift across the room. Halfway through his martini, she caught him staring at her. She smiled.

He finished the drink in a gulp and ordered another.

" — antediluvian — "

" — locus of fusion points — "

" — referential gnosis — "

" — tangential trajectory — "

Startled, he looked up from his bleary examination of the pimentos in his olives. The same voice next to him, but were those words correct? Surely not —

He got up to use the men's room, and shot a brief glance at the party beside him. They were a group of nondescript sorts, three men and a woman, no ties, a dress, a clatch of drinks in the field before them. Laughter....

A flicker of something in the shadows between them. Had it been a cane? It looked wooden...but it was too angled and barbed to be a cane. Chitinous was the better word, actually, thought Dennis. Barbed.

He used the bathroom, and when he got back, the beautiful woman was gone. Disappointed, he sat down, only to find a triply folded napkin under his drink.

"Hi," the note read. "I'm in Room 2556. Can I buy you a nightcap at eleven o'clock? — The Girl by the Squalid Old Slug."

Dennis Macke's heart hammered in his chest.

At eleven o'clock Dennis knocked on the door of Room Number 2556 of the Beverly Hills Hotel.

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His heart was beating hard again, and his head was in a swirl. He'd had another martini, and then he'd called his girlfriend back home. Jeanne had wanted to come, but her mother was ill and there was no one else to take care of her. Jeanne had cried and nagged and had been a general pain, and so he had assured her he'd be back by the weekend and everything would be fine.

By the time he got around to thinking about dinner and a cruise around Hollywood, he was far too head-numb to drive, and so he'd called up the limo. Gary the driver took him up Sunset, got him a Spago pizza take-out, cruised along the strip pointing out the nightlife. Rock clubs, strip clubs, jazz clubs. Neon, neon, neon. They took in the early show at the Comedy Club together, then they stopped at Tower Records, where Gary bought some new CDs for himself while Dennis bought a newspaper, some magazines, and the new book of essays by A.S. Byatt.

All through the gentle palmy-balmy night, streaked with Porches and Mercedes and sports cars, the nebulous emptiness and ephemeral colors, Dennis thought about the girl who'd left the note. He checked his watch constantly. He did not want to be late. Gary asked if he wanted a girl for the night, but Dennis refused. No, he had a date at 11:00 PM. Had he not had that date, though, he would not have taken Gary's offer anyway. It wasn't so much Jeanne, or fear of STDs or whatever else as it was a low-level sense of off-kilter-ness, out-of-balance, wrongness he felt seeping through the cracks of the limo from the LA night.

He loved it. It scared him to death. There was a sharp beauty about everything, but he sensed another sharpness beneath — the unforgiving edges of hidden razors. Purely intuitive. Everything else was sensually alive and electric, like it was all one huge environmental manqué, plugged into a never-ending power supply.

Gary got him back at 10:45. He'd washed his face, brushed his teeth, and now here he was, walking into giddy uncertainty.

Knock knock.

"Just a minute," came a crystalline voice, female, melodious. There was a promise in it, like the promise of a naked woman, posed — and yet an unnecessary promise. The beauty was sufficient in itself.

Dennis stepped back, adjusted himself.

The door opened and she leaned a smile out.

"Hi. Thanks for coming. I'm Hillary."

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She was scrubbed bright. She wore a little bit of makeup and she smelled exactly as he imagined, only inexpressibly fresher.

"Dennis." He cleared his throat, feeling his words clunked up in disorder at the top of his throat. "Uhm..."

She gave him her hand and she laughed. She was wearing blue jeans and a crisp white blouse. Bright blue bracelets and earrings tinkled with her laughter.

"You're not from LA, are you?" she said, twinkle-eyed. "I didn't think so. The way you were sitting there, drinking a martini, looking *extremely* out of place. Just *so* cute. Like Woody in *Cheers*. Come in, Dennis, I won't bite."

He entered and she closed the door behind her.

"I'm afraid I don't have any martinis, but I've some very nice White Zinfandel." She pointed to a bucket of ice with an uncorked bottle sticking up from it. "Napa Valley."

"Sure, that would be fine." He clasped his hands behind him so they wouldn't fumble at his belt buckle like they tended to, betraying midwestern hick nervousness. God, such clusters of diamond words he could string together in his prose with, ah! bright gleams — and yet when his endocrine system was chugging, he couldn't talk worth a damn.

She went to the bucket. "You must think me awfully brazen. I hope you don't think I'm common."

"Actually, your note was an answered daydream." Hey, that wasn't so bad! "But you seemed to have company."

"Hmm? Oh that was just my agent — he's married and I don't touch married men — I just let them touch me a little." She poured the wine into two elegant glasses. "You're not married, are you?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. No ring but a definite ring quality to your face. Here you go. Cheers and all that."

She handed him the glass of wine, invited him to sit down.

"Not that we're going to touch or anything, necessarily," she said after a contemplative sip. "I needed company tonight and you looked trustworthy. Was I right, Dennis?"

He was staring at his wine, wondering if he should be disappointed or not. Then again, if she'd answered the door wearing nothing but a towel he'd probably have run away.

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"I thought you said this was white wine," he said. "It's pink!"

"Well, of course it's pink... It's White Zin..." That tinkling laugh again. "Oh, of course! Yes, actually it's more of a blush."

"It tastes wonderful."

"I thought you'd like it. Now — me, I'm a model and they're after me to act. I've been here lots. I'm living in Manhattan, but I'm from Iowa. Went to Iowa U."

"Iowa City."

"Yes."

"Great writing program there."

"You're a writer... I thought you looked like a writer."

"Not full time, until recently. I teach high school English in Minnesota — I've written a few books. *Tender Plains* is one. *River Grass* is another." Her look was blank. She'd never heard of either one. "Then I wrote a long book...kind of a saga thing about Scandinavians coming to settle America and their story through the World Wars." Face still blank. Charming, but empty. Tabula rasa. "It's called *Streams of Time.*"

That face brightened intensely. "Yes!"

"You've heard of it? But it hasn't been published yet!"

"But it's been bought. By Twentieth Century Lion, right? That's why you're here!" Upon the face now were writ tomes of unreadable eagerness and impression. "Oh, how marvelous. How utterly wonderful. You must be terribly excited."

"Yes, thank you — but it's all very new."

"You know, I had a hunch — A hunch! My instincts are quite golden, you know. That's why I knew I could leave you that note. Your expression was just so open — so, well, I don't want to say totally innocent — You *are* a man."

"Sorry." He regretted it immediately, but didn't know what else to say. It seemed to be just the right word, though, because she laughed again in her sweet way, and she touched him on the arm.

She said, "Let me get my sweater. Let's go out. Let's have some fun."

She had a rented Jaguar and she ripped it through the night, laughing. They tore down Rodeo Drive and she gestured at the expensive stores where she bought her "work clothes," as she called them. She angled up

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Santa Monica Boulevardonto Hollywood.

She roared past Hollywood and Vine.

"Dismal, huh?" she said, her scarf blowing in the wind. "And right along here is Walk of Fame. How'd you like to strive for glamour and success all your life, and then have your name trod on by whores and pimps and sweaty tourists for eternity?"

"I don't think I'd be aware of that."

"No, probably not. It still gives me the shivers, though."

She stopped outside the Mann Chinese theater and showed how much bigger her feet were than Marilyn Monroe's. His dwarfed Clark Gable's. He was amazed at how squalid and petty it all looked. Impressions in grainy concrete by souvenir stands.

A crowd was let out of one of the theaters as they inspected the glamorous memorabilia. They shambled out to their cars, and their voices from a distance seemed in foreign languages.

Afterward, they walked across the street to the Roosevelt Hotel. On the second floor, above the lobby, stretched an exhibit of old photographs of Hollywood's past. Hillary showed him a photo of the Hollywood sign when it read HOLLYWOODLAND. The placard said that the area used to be a real estate development of the early twentieth century.

There was also a picture of early settlers in the area in the late nineteenth century.

"Mars," said Dennis.

"What?"

"It looks like they were settling Mars, not a part of California." He had to trot out some knowledge, so that he wouldn't seem the total ignoramus. "I mean, it was a desert back there, before they had any water."

"Oh. Yes, that's right," she said.

After walking through the exhibit, she charmed a waiter downstairs at the CINEGRILL to let them watch the last part of a jazz show. He ordered glasses of White Zinfandel. She held his hand as the saxophonist played a tribute to Stan Getz as a finale.

They buzzed back and he walked her to her door.

"What's your room number?"

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He gave it to her.

"Maybe I'll give you a call tomorrow." She kissed him on the cheek, and then left him outside. He walked back to his room feeling ebullient and light-headed. His walk back to his room took him past the Polo Lounge. Shadows moved beyond the curtains and whispers spoke softly amidst the silence in a subtonal language that could have been English or Swahili.

THE NEXT DAY, when Gary knocked on his door, he was up, breakfasted, and ready for his meeting. As they trundled onto the freeway toward the San Fernando Valley where Twentieth Century Lion was, Gary asked him how he'd done with the girl.

"Might have another date tonight," said Dennis, letting it go at that, along with a satisfied smile.

"Be needing me?"

"No. She has a car."

"I'll be on call anyway. I'd like to get a look at this babe."

"How do I know I can trust you not to steal her away from me?"

"Out here? Trust...?" It was Gary's turn to grin back in the rear view mirror. "You can trust us all in LA, babe!"

The limo wheeled through the Cahuenga Pass and zipped on up the Ventura Freeway to Burbank. Twentieth Century Lion was a wide lot quite close to the NBC studios, and it looked to Dennis like a jumble of World War II barracks with a fresh coat of paint. It all had a ramshackle feel to it — somehow, he'd always thought that a Hollywood studio would look more...well, more glamorous.

A guard just waved Gary on through. Gary threaded through the twisted streets, finally stopping in front of a large, officious looking building.

"Just hop on up to the receptionist. She'll tell you where to go. And don't worry, I'll be here to take you back to your hotel. And Dennis..."

"Yes?"

"Break a leg!"

It wasn't a receptionist really, it was just a guy who told him which floor Henry Delgado could be found on. The receptionist of that floor —

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the eighth, the topmost — smiled brightly at him and told him he was expected. He only sat for a minute or two, marveling at the fact that so far in this building he'd seen more suits and ties than in the entire city of Los Angeles.

A secretary came out, eyes wide behind blue framed glasses. "Mr. Delgado is delighted to have you in LA, Mr. Macke. Please come this way."

The office was cutting edge snazzy, streamlined and immaculate. She showed him through a stained walnut door into a room. That it was a conference room was immediately apparent — a long teak table with coffee cups and chairs and smiles on top of suits were waiting for him.

The man at the head of the table got up immediately. He was wearing an expensive Italian suit. He shook Dennis's hand and introduced himself as Henry Delgado, Executive V.P. of Lion's Feature Film Development Division. He introduced Dennis around to the assembled men and women of Development. Dennis got lost in a flurry of names. Despite the fact that everyone acted very casually, he found himself to be quite nervous. Something wasn't right, and he realized what it was — part of it anyway. Even though this was plainly business, there was absolutely nothing stiff or businesslike about any of the demeanors he faced. It was all too calculatedly pleasant. They all seemed voluble people, a bright jokey attitude hanging about them as they bounced about and enthused over his novel.

Well, the money was real enough. And they'd paid to bring him out here to wine and dine him — only the best. He forced himself to relax and let the easy-goingness pour over him as though it was just natural and normal.

Nonetheless, he probably couldn't hide his ill-at-easeness, and they'd probably thought that was perfectly natural.

"We hope you've been enjoying yourself here in LA."

"Oh yes, thank you."

"Now then. Of course taking lunch is de rigueur," said Henry Delgado. "But first let's take a meeting!"

Easy second banana laughter.

"Now, we've bought the rights to your excellent book and we intend to make a really fine movie out of it," said Henry Delgado. "But you know, you're the writer, and we just respect the hell out of writers, don't we, Jim?"

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The man next to him shrugged. "Well, I'm a writer, so I hope so."

"We all dabble," said Delgado. "But Dennis...You have a magic way with words and storytelling. Now the task before us is to take the body of work and translate it into one of the best damn movies that this country...hell, this *world* has ever seen!"

Despite himself, Dennis found himself getting excited. He couldn't help himself. He loved movies too. Everyone loved movies...they were a cultural, almost spiritual common denominator of life in the Twentieth Century. Who could resist the thrill of an engrossing tale flashed on a screen in front of an audience response, the smell of popcorn in the air, the taste of crushed ice and Coke in your mouth. He remembered his Dad taking him to his first movie — *Pinocchio*, it was. God, how he'd loved it. Movies! A world of mighty sight, fantastic sound. Stories, spectacle, emotion, music! The great sweep of human invention and panache, dazzling, dazzling!

"Great! I mean, that sounds really good, Mr. Delgado."

"Fine. You been treated okay here?"

"Oh, sure. I'm having a really good time."

Delgado nodded. "I've got to tell you, Dennis. That agent of yours got you a pretty good deal. Writing the first draft of the screenplay. Usually we like an experienced adaptor to get things going."

"Well, I haven't got a whole lot of illusion, Mr. Delgado. It's kind of a long book. I was actually hoping that it would be made into a mini-series for TV...like maybe *Lonesome Dove* by Larry MacMurtry. But I guess we could just do the central part of the book.... That would make a pretty good movie, I hope."

"Scandinavians," said Delgado, out of the blue. He picked up two pages of heavy-bond paper, stapled together. "Scandinavians," he said thoughtfully.

"Well, Norwegians, to be more exact. The book, as you know, is about the history of Norwegians, settling the Midwest."

Delgado licked his lips. "Hmm. Yes, I'm a football fan. Love those Vikings.... But Dennis...Dennis, the thing is...well, look at it this way. There was this movie came out a couple of weeks ago...Quincy? What the hell was the name of that piece of dung?"

"*The Settlers*, sir," piped up a voice.

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"That's it. *The Settlers*. Sounds action filled, doesn't it. Some kind of wholesome Disney thing. Well...in a word it was a dud."

"But I read a review about that..." said Dennis haltingly. "It was about post Columbian colonists. My book happens in the Nineteenth Century."

"Hmmm. Right. Well, Dennis. Nothing wrong with the Nineteenth Century. But you know, we've just had a couple of really big epic movies that were Westerns. You know, Indians, guns, bows and arrows. Noble savages...brave pioneers...Whew, it took a lot of guts for those guys to go through what they did.... I don't see much *motion* here in this outline. So I'm thinking...this great story, these great characters...can't they meet up with some Indians?"

"Well...there were a few tribes in the...but the book isn't *about* Indians."

"Please. Native Americans. Let's be politically correct. Okay, Jimmy. Make that a definite note. We want Indians in *Streams of Time*."

Dennis blinked.

"And Scandinavians...I don't know."

"Norwegians."

"Even worse. Look, any other kinds of people in this book? Any black people?"

"Well, a few I guess, but..."

"Why not a story of the struggle of black people in the area. I like that. We've got to do a black story this year, or we're fucked. *Streams of Time* would be a perfect vehicle."

"Yes sir. And we've just put Sidney Poitier under director's contract."

"Well, talk about good fortune. Note. A definite note. Black people. We want lots of black people here...put a lid on the Norwegians." He took a sip of mineral water, looked out his window for a moment. "You know, I had breakfast with the studio executive president at six-thirty this morning and you know what he said? Two words. Child abuse. It's hot and he wants it in a film. Stan, I forgot...is there child abuse in *Streams of Time*?"

"No sir. Nothing about it in the reader's report."

"Too bad. Too bad. How about children?"

"I think so."

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Delgado shrugged and grinned straight at Dennis. "No problem, then. They're abused." He turned to the scribbler. "A note. A *definite* note."

Dennis was stunned. He'd expected changes in the story. There *had* to be changes. But nothing like this...

"I really don't think that the...the *theme* of the book would come through."

The executive looked at his fellow story people. He mulled. He scratched his head. He played long fingers along smooth, tan chin. He nodded. "I'm glad you said that. I'm a great admirer of artistic integrity. Aren't I, guys?"

"He is."

"Yeah. You can count on Henry. He'll sell your book for you."

"You're looking at a year at number one hardcover. Just like *Silence of the Lambs*."

"Or *The Firm*."

"Or *The Bible*."

Laughter. General air of artificial feel-goodness.

Henry Delgado leaned over toward Dennis. He smelled sharp and alert and hungry, like a tiger doused in Calvin Klein cologne. "You see. You're in good hands. Trust me.... Your theme...it's going to be underlined in solid day-glo. It's going to shine through to countless millions of movie-goers all around the world.... And Mrs. Macke...your mom is going to be sitting in the theater afterward, sobbing with pride that she gave birth to a brave artistic soul like yours...unashamed to tell the truth...the way it was...for posterity."

He leaned back and grinned. "Now tell me...who do you think would be best for the lead? Dustin Hoffman or Robert DeNiro?"

Good Scandinavians, both of them, thought Dennis Macke.

HE GOT OUT of the meeting at one o'clock, when the story executives flocked out for their "idea lunches." One of them, a faceless grinning California boy, had offered to take him out to a local watering hole and "check out the babes in for auditions," but Dennis Macke demurred. His head was spinning. He just need to get home, lie down for a while.

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All this sun. All this brightness. It was getting to him. He just wanted to go back to the Beverly Hills Hotel and close his thick drapes and put on the night blinders they'd provided him and just crawl into bed for a while and not think.

Gary and the limo took him back. Gary observed that he "Had That Look."

That Look?

"Yeah. It's like when you take a bite of cake and you realize it's iced with shit!"

Gary laughed in a way that was supposed to express camaraderie and we're-in-this-togetherness. Dennis just sank deeper into the limo, looking out the tinted glass as the palm trees and haze slithered by. He felt...he felt as though he'd just managed to let loose a high-voltage wire that had been charging him with a perverse energy.

It was here in the air now, that energy. It had been in that room, crackling in the eyes of those studio executives. A manic cosmic grasping, a scrabbling of invisible pincer claws amidst a pile of garbage and jewelry.

When he got into the room, the first thing he did was to call his literary agent, the man who had closed the deal. He caught the man just as he was about to leave. Hendrik had a brusqueness, an impatience about him when he was in a hurry, and so Dennis kept it quick and concise. What did the contract say about his power here?

What it said, Hendrik explained, was that he'd gotten lots of money and could well afford a case of K-Y jelly to ease the pain.

Dennis ordered room service alcohol, closed the drapes and pulled the bedcovers over himself.

When she called at seven o'clock, he'd gotten through about three snifters of brandy, but curiously wasn't at all drunk.

"Hey. How'd it go today?" she said.

"Terrible. They want to ruin my novel."

"Hey. It could be worse," said Hillary. "Thousands of novels are published every year that they've no desire to ruin. Tell you what. Let's go spend some of their money on a nice dinner.... And then I want to show you something."

"I don't know." He felt numb inside. Dead and numb.

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"It will help you understand."

"Oh, I understand. It's a power thing, isn't it? Egomaniacs who have no powers of creativity want to stomp with jealousy on those that do."

"Power? Maybe. But it's not really what you think. Look, there's nothing like a thick slab of steak, a baked potato and big glass of red wine to calm the heart of a man. And I've heard that a pretty girl helps, too."

"Why are you doing this? What are you getting out of it?"

"A free dinner. Maybe I see something in you that used to be in me. Hmmm? And then again, maybe I figure someday you might be able to help me, somehow."

The truth was somehow refreshing.

"Okay. I'll order up some coffee, I guess. Meet you at eight?"

"That would be just about perfect."

At first he was afraid that she was going to take him to Morton's, a watering hole famous for Hollywood power dinners and also for its steak. Instead, she took him to a place in Hollywood that looked not too presumptuous, but smelled quite good.

"No maître d'. Just good food," she explained.

After martini cocktails, she ordered her steak very rare. He had his medium well. They ordered a bottle of California red wine, an aromatic young burgundy whose color blended perfectly with the steak juice that collected on Hillary's plate. She ate with gusto, talking about ambition and makeup and catty people and who could do what for whom and where her friends had gone and where they hadn't. She asked questions about what kind of house he'd like, if he had a house. A house by the sea? A house up on Mulholland maybe, riding like a castle on a cloud? Or a big house in Brentwood or Bel Air or Beverly, a fortress of green in the Golden State? Tennis courts were necessary wherever, she reported — take Steven Spielberg, for example — he'd bought a whole three million dollar estate next to his Pacific Palisades complex, just to knock down a beautiful old house and build a tennis court!

They drank their burgundy. Before he knew what was happening, she ordered another, and when he came out of the men's room she surprised him with brandy snifters and dessert.

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By the time he signed for the check, using the credit card account Twentieth Century Lion had given him, he was quite drunk and was glad that Hillary was driving him in her green Jaguar.

As they left, a gust of breeze caught her hair and made a wild Medusa of it, blowing her scent in his face. She laughed and grabbed his hand and her eyes sparkled mischievously in the guttering gas torches outside the restaurant.

"Now — what I wanted to show you."

The valet varoomed up in the green convertible, received five dollars from Dennis's pocket for his trouble, and they were off, speeding through the curves of Sunset Boulevard, then onto Laurel Canyon Boulevard, up, up, past Mount Olympus (was Valhalla next, Dennis wondered), past the Laurel Canyon Store where the famous and infamous had shopped, up along the curving road to the top of the Santa Monica Mountains. There the little green sportscar hung a right and powered along a dizzying set of curves, past white palaces tilting into the night, past bushes and dirt and stretches of nothing.

She pulled off the road so quickly that Dennis thought she'd gone crazy and was hurling them both off a cliff. But she braked the car and they stopped and he could immediately see that it was a pull-out, a scenic view.

"You can see the Valley, the Cahuenga Pass *and* the basin from here," she said. "It's the very best view."

Lights, lights, lights. A scatter of lights like a plankton farm, phosphorescent and floating in wine-dark sea. They were all alone, somehow, suspended above this ethereal majesty, and his brain seemed pumped with helium soaring even higher, tethered to his body by the thinnest of threads.

The next thing he knew, she was kissing him. Her hands were moving along his body like the strokes of a painter. He closed his eyes and his mind seemed to lift higher, bending bulging eyes downward to the two of them, squirming together softly.

His head drifted down her neck and she sighed and trilled with soft laughter.

"Ooh," she said. "Oooh. Let me show you something. Let me show you something I bet they don't do in Minnesota."

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He drifted back up to her lips, his bilious mind objecting, but his body accepting readily. He was vaguely aware of her left arm moving, undulating, somehow thickening. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her hand and it seemed to blur, blur against the dashboard, morphing into what for the life of him looked like the proboscis of an elephant, slick with moisture, several tongues licking out hungrily.

Too much to drink, he thought. Too much...

Something tugged on the zipper of his pants, and then he was engulfed in sensation and the tether snapped and his brain sailed up through the sky and burst on the cruel points of the stars.

He opened his eyes.

He looked out past the edge of the precipice. The lights below and beyond seemed no longer to merely look like stars. They *were* stars. Fiery suns amidst rainbow planets. Comets shot by in the blackness, and in the middle of it all a maelstrom of nothingness, like the drain in Hitchcock's *Psycho* pulling all matter and energy into one all puissant black hole.

Staring into the maw, he felt dizzy. He turned his head toward the side of the cliff and saw, to his dismay, that the cliff had steepened, that gnarled roots feathered with mist hung out like withered limbs along the underside of the whole LA area. He was atop an alien island, drifting through a dimensionless space, time and gravity unstuck.

Laughter sounded somewhere. Screeching screams. Sobs. Distant, but somehow immediate. The crimson and magenta haloing it all seemed to throb...

He closed his eyes, and he passed out again.

When Dennis Macke woke up, he was in bed in a dark room. After a moment of fear and disorientation, he saw that it was the room at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

Lying draped over a pillow next to him, fragrant with her perfume, was a piece of Hillary's lingerie. Pinned to it was a note: LOVELY. THANKS.

He lay in bed for a moment, remembering all the drink, waiting for the hangover to kick in.

Nothing happened. He felt just fine.

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He remembered the dream, though. It must have been a dream, right? How could it have been anything else?

He must have slept with Hillary last night. Surely the note proved that. And the dinner with her and the drive up to Mulholland — that had all been real enough.

But the rest? Dennis shuddered. He went to the phone and asked room service for a pot of coffee and an Alka Seltzer. Not that he really needed the Alka Seltzer — it was almost like a precaution, a ritual.

Troubled, he drank the coffee and opened the windows. For some reason the light — which sheeted in now no less brightly — did not alarm him. Rather it soothed him, relaxed him. He had a strange desire to go and buy a bathing suit so that he could take a dip in the pool.

Instead, he sat on the balcony for a while, sipping coffee. Somehow during the night, he'd acquired a cellular phone. It was on his dresser. Property of Hotel. He hadn't noticed it before. He took the cellular phone out to the balcony, along with his notebook computer. He might as well work on his new book. He hadn't had the chance to before, but as far as he knew he had nothing on his schedule and so he might as well get some work in. He had just about decided that he'd better let the screenplay of *Streams* go. That was what his subconscious decision had been yesterday, he realized. Somehow it didn't seem quite as important today, but he had time to mull it over anyway, right?

He had fresh fruit and yogurt for breakfast under the California sun, and he was just commencing work on chapter five of his novel *Rites of Winter*, when there was a knock on the door.

He went to answer. A delivery boy gave him an envelope. He gave the delivery boy a tip and closed the door.

The envelope was from Twentieth Century Lion.

Before he could even open it, the phone rang.

"Hello?"

An energized, self-confident voice boomed back at him. "Dennis. Delgado here. Twentieth Century Lion. You get the package?"

"Well, yes...just a moment ago....I..."

"Good news, bad news, good news. I've been promoted to Chief Development Executive. Had a meeting this morning with the bean counters. Our budgets are a little top heavy. Slash slash slash. Looks like

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we're going to have to put epics on the back burner. Like yours. However, I was impressed with our meeting. Very impressed. I've been working on an outline of my own awhile. It's hot, I think, but I need a writer with some guts and soul. I think you're my man. What do you say?"

"Well, I have to look at the outline, of course." What he was thinking though, in a mind that didn't seem quite his anymore, was about the quarter million dollars, minimum, EXTRA, this would mean.

"I'd need you here for a while, we'd put you up in a nice apartment. Bring the wife or girlfriend or whatever out if you like, that's fine...so, I'm going to call your agent and make an offer. You read the outline. Lookin' forward to working with you."

The phone clicked in his ear. He took the outline out to the balcony. In the distance, he could hear the splashing at the pool, and the thrumming of high quality engines in high quality shells and the murmur of breeze through palms and cyprus. There was the gentle scent of flowers in the bright air and a non-sequitur desire for a martini suddenly hit him.

He settled for coffee instead.

The outline concerned an alien who came to Earth to drive stock cars. Arnold Schwarzenegger was mentioned as lead. This alien became friends with a young tomboy pit jockey and her younger brother (Macauley Culkin). However, the alien's nemesis (Hulk Hogan) finds him and decides to try to take him out in a mammoth climactic stock car race.

The final comment: "All the kicks of *Star Wars*, minuscule budget."

Dennis finished it. He drank his coffee. He read it again. His agent called.

"Congratulations. They really like you. I can't handle the fine points, so I'm setting you up with an associate out there. We're talking a lot of money here, Dennis."

He had thought that when he got the call, he would say no. Somehow, though, he found himself taking down his new Hollywood agent's name and number.

Well, he thought. I can still write novels.

Like now. I'm in the middle of chapter five and I know what's happening in my book. The prose is flowing smoothly, and everything's just fine.

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He sat back out on the patio and picked up his notebook computer again and turned it on.

Above him the sun beat down and he felt a trickle of sweat slide down his cheek.

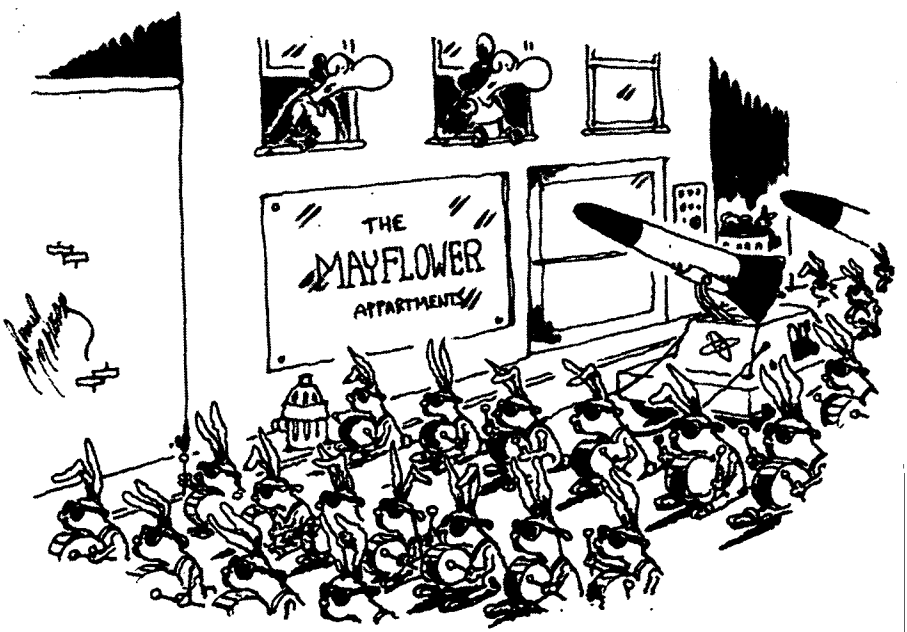
Not a martini.

A Tom Collins. A tall cool drink, topped with an umbrella.

He called room service. He thought about the sun and the moon and the stars and about Hillary and he found himself saving chapter five, and then calling up a blank screen.

Dennis Macke thought for a moment, and then typed in the first four letters of every screenplay ever written — and likely, he mused, hankering for that Tom Collins, of every screenplay that would ever be written....

FADE.



"They never should have let them breed."

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

A DIAMOND AGE

A SINGLE ELEment defines the properties of life as we know it — carbon.

Light in mass and promiscuous in its associations, it seems the only plausible substrate for life-engendering processes. Yet it may play a great role in extending life's grasp, as well.

I'll begin with the prosaic issues of industry and materials, details which normally seem pedestrian. Gradually I'll broaden the focus, teasing out the implications that details of atomic properties have for immense, even astronomical structures.

The electronics industry has spent the last fifty years working its way up the fourth column of the periodic table, Group IV. They started from the first germanium diodes, which could herd electrons through gates like obedient sheep. Later we advanced to silicon, the basis of the chip, upon which we write the microscopic circuits which make our computers fast and reliable.

Each of these materials required thousands of people-years to develop from a laboratory curiosity into a thriving industry. To elicit their sometimes subtle properties demanded control of impurities at the parts per billion level. Resting at the top of the column is the least massive nucleus of the group — carbon, a unique material, the final frontier in this series of substances.

In the Group IV family, the heavier the element, the more metallic it is. This property comes from the shell nature of how nuclei hold electrons to their bosom.

Lead, of atomic number 82, is an easily melted metal. This is because it holds its 82 electrons in six shells, so the farthest out is only

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weakly bound. It can be pried loose to go voyaging, making lead a good conductor.

Carbon, of atomic number 6, holds only six electrons in two shells, so holds them close. Carbon is a nonmetal but has the same cubic crystal structure as its nearest neighbors in Group IV, silicon, germanium, and gray tin. Each atom is covalently bonded to four neighbors to form the corners of a tetrahedron, a solid figure with four three-sided faces.

This makes these elements a bit odd. They are more apt to bond with themselves than with other elements, and so do not form discrete small molecules, like oxygen.

Instead, any fragment is uniformly bonded throughout, a single giant molecule. Carbon makes a "network solid" naturally as diamond and graphite. In slippery layers graphite makes flat sheets, so it strips away easily and makes good pencil leads and lubricants.

Zapping graphite with a laser can form an artificial carbon marble. Carbon vapor first formed in an electric arc or by intense laser pulses, then rapidly cooled by collisions with a cold, inert background gas, spontaneously finds a shape never seen in nature.

And an odd shape it is. Sixty atoms form a tiny hollow sphere in a soccer-ball shape of 32 faces, 12 pentagons and 20 hexagons. Named "buckminsterfullerene" for Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome, which it strikingly resembles, a "buckyball" is the roundest of round molecules.

Mixed with impurities, it can be either an insulator or a conductor, a semiconductor or even a superconductor. Its hollow structure lets it trap other atoms. They can build a "buckytube" of single-walled carbon pipe. Controlled, this could become a "nanofinger." Marry two at a hinge and you have an atomic "hand." Nanotechnology may well depend on development of such carbon fingers.

But buckyballs aren't the only hot prospect on the Carbon Frontier. The different bonding configurations available to carbon make diamond a particularly difficult material to control, even though it is just a different crystallographic organization of carbon atoms.

Technically speaking, diamonds aren't really forever. They are metastable, and will eventually convert to graphite — but this takes hundreds of millions of years, so on human time scales diamond behaves like an ordinary stable solid.

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The trick to forming all of these new materials is to create an environment far from equilibrium, with variations in temperature that happen so fast that the carbon atoms get stuck in a phase which is a local minimum of the free energy, rather than the true, lower energy ground state. Many researchers are pursuing this theme to explore new techniques of making diamond and diamond-like materials.

Artificial diamonds have been made since the 1950s by simulating the extreme conditions of temperature and pressure in the earth's crust, where natural diamonds are formed. Just as in nature, though, growing a large crystal takes geological times, so only small crystallites can be produced economically. Such diamond dust makes great abrasives.

Current lab work is very different. It uses gas or plasma at very low pressures and high velocities, which leads to high growth rates of diamond. With a plasma jet, hydrogen gas with small amounts of hydrocarbon added heats to temperatures of 8000 degrees Kelvin (K), considerably hotter than the surface of the sun. Then the plasma squirts into a vacuum chamber at speeds of Mach 4. It gets cooled on a metal plate, where the temperature drops from 8000 degrees K to 1200 K within a few microseconds.

If conditions are just right, a diamond film three inches across and nearly a millimeter thick grows on the plate. This converts methane into diamond simply by heating and cooling the gas, a trick that would make even ancient alchemists jealous.

The success of this and related techniques prove that it is relatively easy to crystallize carbon in the "wrong" phase, diamond rather than pedestrian graphite. Details of how and why this happens are still obscure. Still, engineers have devised a way to make a high density, high energy beam of pure carbon which can be condensed on a substrate to form a film.

Until 1995, many laboratories pursued this path. A heated crucible of buckyballs forms "bucky vapor," which then ionizes and breaks into carbon fragments. The films formed are amorphous mixture bonds like graphite's and the tetrahedral bonds of diamond. Controlling the beam energy and the substrate temperature can tune the properties of the films through a remarkably wide range, from very diamond-like (hard, transparent and highly insulating) to graphite-like (soft, black, and conducting).

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Big-time economics looms behind all this. Forming lots of diamond and diamond-like materials quickly and cheaply opens up many applications.

Diamond is the hardest material. Its interlocking tetrahedrons resist stresses. Imagine a spray-on super hard surface coating for items ranging from drill bits and cutting tools to turbine blades. Many industrial processes would become far more reliable and cheaper. Ordinary items like sunglasses and disk drives wouldn't break.

Beyond hardness, diamond is also the world champion in many other properties. It is the best thermal conductor of any solid at room temperature by nearly an order of magnitude. This is an attractive property for electronic chip designers, faced with the problem of removing more and more heat from smaller and smaller packages as we force more current through them.

Diamond is also one of the most transparent materials, used in demanding optical applications for electromagnetic waves ranging from X-rays to the infrared. It has the highest refractive index, bending light through large angles, so glasses made of it could be thin, light and yet incredibly durable.

Diamond is structurally identical to silicon, so it is a semiconductor — that is, it conducts electrons poorly at low temperatures, but by adding minute quantities of other substances, or by applying heat or light or voltage, conduction improves greatly. Transistors and microchips depend upon this effect.

This makes diamond useful in active electronic devices which could work at very high temperatures, and in lasers that emit blue light. Blue light sources work well in optical storage devices such as compact disks, since shorter wavelengths translate into more bits per square centimeter.

All this was enough to whet the appetite of many investors, but in 1995 an accident raised the stakes considerably. Pravin Mistry, a British metallurgist who founded a small engineering company in Michigan, was experimenting with four powerful, finely tuned laser beams while coating aluminum.

His idea was to make the lasers concentrate at a point, breaking down the background nitrogen and heating it to a plasma, plus a very thin layer of the target surface. Chemical reactions between the target and the gas would form an ultrastrong bond, building up a coat.

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Usually his team used nitrogen gas as background while coating an aluminum target with a hard titanium, also introduced into the hot, gaseous chamber. Then fate intervened. Accidentally, they used carbon dioxide instead of nitrogen.

A dense coat quickly formed, but when tested, it wasn't the titanium compound they had wanted. It was diamond.

Titanium is tough, but nobody had thought that the toughest material of all could form this way — a thousand times faster than the methods then (and now) in use. Robots operated Mistry's equipment under computer control. Unlike existing experimental methods, Mistry's method is already ready for industrial use.

If this method generalizes to a wide range of target materials, it would give us a kind of brush able to paint diamond on a wide range of devices. Think of combat vehicles whose windows could not be shattered or even chipped. Imagine "painting" machines to resist wear and corrosion.

Mistry is coating many different materials to find the limits of the process, patenting his process as he goes. Already some coats are inches thick, taking the process from painting to layering. This may mean that one could paint part of a gear to harden it, and coat another, more exposed portion to resist corrosion. Such differential abilities would mean parts with what would seem like super-properties.

So far this discovery seems to have no bounds. In particular, once diamond layering begins, the coat seems to bind durably with the metal beneath, and then form intact crystals above. How far this can go is still unknown.

But suppose the limit is essentially enormous. This means one could make diamonds of any size and shape.

Naturally, we think of giant gems. Alas, this idea has already been tried and failed — for marketing reasons. Women disdain artificial commercial gemstones, no matter how gleaming, so they have never been a big hit in the market.

But much else can be made of a superstrong material, particularly if it can be engineered to have differing properties where they are most needed. For example, using the best steel, we could build towers six kilometers high; with lighter aluminum, ten kilometers.

In comparison, Mount Everest stands nine kilometers above sea level, on a very broad base; it is near the height limit stone can reach at

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our value of gravitational acceleration, g. Lessen gravity, as on Mars, and mountains rear far higher.

Going to ultralight composite materials such as graphite-epoxy could take us up to around fifty kilometers, the threshold of space.

There we stall, except for diamond. We could extend a truly massive diamond tower further into space, where the fundamental limitation becomes not the press of gravity, but stability.

Unless we followed a brute-force solution like Mt. Everest, we would be faced with erecting a spindly steeple through an atmosphere lashed by cross-cutting winds. Shoring it up against gusts which can easily reach over 100 km/hour makes costs prohibitive.

Might there be a better way of securing the tower? Traditional spires are anchored at one end and free at the other, which amplifies stability problems enormously. How about tying down (or rather, up) the other end?

In 1964 I was a lowly graduate student at the University of California at San Diego. Quite gratified at attending a beach picnic with senior faculty, I was startled to have a question fired at me by Hugh Bradner, a well known oceanographer: Could a cable be hung down from an artificial earth satellite until it touched the ground? No, I answered, going on instant intuition; the tensile strength required was too large.

"Right," Bradner said, smiling in anticipation. "But if we could make really strong materials, how should we taper the cable?"

There he had me, for though the tapering equation follows directly from the existing mechanical theory of long cables hanging under their own weight, I couldn't do the calculation in my head. (This method of sudden interrogation was common at UCSD, making it one of the most, ah, interesting places to go to graduate school in the country.) Bradner had, and was about to publish.

So I thought, watching the waves break on the La Jolla shore. Even Bradner couldn't expect a student to do a complex integral in his head. So the answer had to be simple, maybe even obvious. I envisioned a cable hanging down, getting thinner toward ground. Seen from below, it would broaden as it rose. In fact, the earth's atmosphere itself thins out exponentially with height. Was that a clue?

"Exponential," I said. Not exactly a pure guess; a lot of physics problems end with such a function.

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"Right," Bradner said. "But still possible to build, someday. The way I figure it..."

I tried to follow his discussion but the picture he painted distracted me from the mathematics. As a technical idea it was "sweet"—but ah, but the idea.

Think of a hanging cable with one end at the orbit which orbits our equator in exactly 24 hours, so it stands vertically, anchored on some mountain spire. Attach an elevator and, presto, the cost of getting into orbit becomes about a dollar a pound, versus about $3,000 now.

Those who hold that ideas spring effervescently from our collective intelligence have a case with the orbital cable, or "skyhook" as Bradner called it. He, John Isaacs, Allyn Vine and George Backus published "Satellite Elongation into a True 'Sky-Hook'" in *Science*, 11 February 1966, only to find that a Russian engineer, Y.N. Artsutanov had considered a "heavenly funicular" in 1960, publishing in a popular magazine.

The co-rotation or "geostationary" point is 36,000 km. high, where many communication satellites linger, hovering at a fixed position in our sky. Think of starting from there.

The basic physics is conceptually simple. A satellite is in balance between centrifugal and gravitational forces, so a cable extended either up or down from the satellite will feel tension, trying to pull away from the balance point. Lower a cable and it will feel a force toward the Earth. Extend one outward and it will feel a force pulling it out. The whole thing is like a rigid radial spoke, moored to the Earth and swinging around with it.

The skyhook would need a counter-weight, to balance the long, tapering column — 110,000 km. of it, stretched outward by the centripetal force of the forced co-rotation. This ungainly spindle would hang like a thread in the night sky, perfectly vertical.

Graphite fiber, which locks together sheets of carbon atoms in an array resembling diamond, is the best material for making skyhooks right now. Still, it would have to be engineered to have a much higher strength-to-weight ratio than present manufacturing can achieve.

Diamond would be far better. Fabrication with diamond could lead to many ordinary changes — for example, replacing our present crystalline graphite fiber golf clubs and tennis rackets with transparent diamond ones. But for huge

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dream-engineering such as the skyhook, diamond is probably essential.

For Earth, that is. Smaller worlds like the Moon and Mars have shallower gravitational wells and thinner atmosphere, so graphite skyhooks would work well there, transferring cargo and people up and down. Aerobraking, which so far does most of the momentum extraction from incoming space vehicles on Earth (like Apollo reentry craft), is ineffectual there.

Two aspects dictate whether skyhooks are possible — weak gravitation, which lessens the needed tension, and fast rotation, which makes the co-rotation orbital radius close in.

Our moon is small, but rotates slowly. Mars is the best candidate in the solar system, with 0.38 g and a 24.5 hour day. Its small moon, Deimos, orbits very close to the right distance for a counter-weight mass. High mountains on the equator further shorten the required span.

Engineering planetary-scale conveyances is attractive as an exercise in foreseeing the ultimate uses materials can have. An Earth skyhook is comparable in scale to building a suspension bridge (which the skyhook is, essentially) around the Earth. Of course we won't construct any skyhooks now, but the prospect can shape how we think of our long range future.

For example, consider the far end of an Earth skyhook, where the "ballast" anchors the cable. An elevator could let out a package there. The skyhook will have a velocity of 11 km/sec there, horizontal to the earth's surface. This is because the entire skyhook is radially straight, under tension, so the far end swings around faster than would an object orbiting there. The package is essentially whipped around by the Earth.

Let the package go and it becomes a spacecraft able to coast on a long elliptical orbit to Saturn, or more quickly to any nearer world. Interplanetary travel could then be the tale of skyhooks, slinging their payloads to each other, snagging incoming packages and sending them down to the surface.

In a remarkable bit of coincidence, two authors used these ideas from the scientific literature to fashion novels, publishing in the same year, 1979 — Charles Sheffield in *The Web Between the Stars*, and Arthur C. Clarke in *The Fountains of Paradise*. Both allowed that some superstrong materials would be needed to make an Earthly "space elevator" and set their develop-

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ments a comfortable distance in the future. Perhaps they did not need to be quite so cautious.

Though grandiose, there is nothing in such ideas beyond Newtonian mechanics. Indeed, tiny versions of skyhooks already exist.

The Shuttle has flown several tethers — long threads which unfurl on winches. These can raise payloads to higher orbits, and seem in prototype quite promising. (Though the first twelve-km. long tether experiment in early 1996 ended in a broken cable. This underlines the essential role played by the strength of materials.)

A more sophisticated role for tethers lies in their electrodynamic properties. A current driven in a tether will feel a force from the magnetic field of the Earth as the shuttle drags it across the field lines. This can be adroitly used to steer the shuttle, raising or lowering its orbit. Essentially, the shuttle will tack against the magnetic "wind" flowing past it.

Or run the electrodynamic tether in reverse: let the current-field interaction drive the current, providing electrical power for onboard systems. The energy ultimately comes from the shuttle orbit.

All these uses assume that a closed current loop can set up in the region around the tether, bringing the charge back. This isn't easy in the thin plasma at the shuttle orbital height. Present tethers eject plasma from the far end, which then dutifully streams back to the shuttle, completing the circuit.

Ah, you may say, there's a problem here. A closed circuit means that the current goes out, then comes back. How come the force exerted on the outward current isn't balanced by the opposite force on the inward current?

The force acting on the returning plasma currents just blows the plasma away, so the force isn't communicated to the shuttle. But the shuttle does feel the force on the outgoing wire tether, because it's moored on the craft. The net force on the tether remains.

Of course, all tethers have a natural enemy — fast orbiting debris which can pock and puncture. Most of the damage comes from micro-meteorites, not man-made junk. Frequencies of collision are so high that a hundred-km. tether would last only about a month.

Weaving several ultra-thin strands together can help this problem. Making them of diamond would greatly aid their long-term survival. The more immediate uses of such exotic inventions point to a

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rough-and-ready composite material which can have thin fibers and yet conduct electricity. Diamond-steel combinations might be made to conduct electricity in hair-thin strands, saving greatly on mass that must be lifted into orbit.

Given the ability to lay down diamond and shape it at will, how far could we go in grandiose construction? Here the original skyhook inventor was again first, with a design I shall call the "spoke skyhook" — or as Hans Moravec and Robert Forward, the engineers who fully developed the idea call it, the Rotavator.

This dynamic cable orbits and rotates, with its ends whirling down to kiss the Earth at regular intervals. It looks like two opposite spokes in a rotating wheel, rolling around the Earth.

Keeping this celestial spoke rotating demands power to overcome the inevitable losses, perhaps supplied by solar panels at the center. They could be coupled to an ion rocket, which would boost the orbit higher. Or perhaps an electrodynamic tether effect could do the job, using the forces between currents and the Earth's magnetic field.

Without the need to steadily offset the force of gravity, the spoke skyhook need be only a quarter of the original skyhook's length, about 8500 km. Three times in the spoke's 183-minute orbit, a cable end touches down on the equator.

At these three stations, the spoke will seem to descend nearly vertically, hover for about a minute, then rise rapidly away at about 2.5 g — much less than the liftoff acceleration of the space shuttle. Snagging onto the end would involve attaching mechanical and magnetic locks.

A typical automobile carries a payload of about 5% of its own mass. A Rotavator would achieve about 1.5%, which is still far better than the usual skyhook.

Probably, to avoid the turbulence of the lower atmosphere, a rendezvous would be arranged. A specially designed airplane would fly up to meet the Rotavator at, say, forty km. altitude. There a special pod attached to the airplane that would snag onto the lowering cable.

Managing the handoff in mid-air would be an anxious moment, to be sure, but the pod would have a parachute in case of wholesale systems failure. Once secured on the Rotavator, the pod can choose its destinations. If it wishes to be let off with no extra spin, it can be raised to the center of the Rotavator, then released into a circular orbit.

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To go to the Moon, simply stay on the whip end of the cable for half an hour, when you'll be 8500 km. above the Earth and moving at the most useful escape speed. The pod separates and vectors toward the Moon at 9 km/sec. In half a day, a similar, smaller Lunar Rotavator snags the pod and lowers it to ground.

These are celestial highwire acts, with rendezvous arranged by mechanics and adroit, small course corrections. The Lunar Rotavator need only weigh about 150 tons, so it could be made in Earth orbit and flown to the Moon.

Looking beyond, the general concept of using rotating cables as a storage bank of momentum could apply to missions between planets. A stiff cable set spinning near Earth could catch and redirect mission craft with no energy expense, if the number of returning ships equals the number outgoing.

I lifted the Rotavator idea for an even more wild application, in a novel, *Tides of Light*. There I made the spoke-skyhook into a living creature, a sort of giant, superstrong tree pressed into service to move life forms from a planet's surface to low orbit. Of course, it would have to be quite strong, and part of an entire ecology using space as a natural habitat.

This was the view taken by myself and Arthur C. Clarke in *Beyond the Fall of Night* — by analogy with the transition life made from the sea to land, we argued, eventually life may leap from atmospheres into the sun-washed, energy-rich but fluid-starved medium of high vacuum.

Under zero gravity, there would be few constraints on the eventual size of any living creatures. So the superstrong tree became part of an entire network mediating between the fluid-rich planets and the boundless freedoms of airless space.

All this is a rather long way from the details of atomic structure where we began, of course. I've tried to illustrate how enormous implications — and structures! — come from small properties. But enough of flights of fancy. There is plenty to do with diamond right away, if we can master the oddities of carbon's tetrahedrons.

Comments on and objections to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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Stephen Dedman has worked as a video librarian, a game designer, a proofreader, and a second-hand dinosaur salesman. He lives in Australia, and publishes much of his short fiction there.

He returns to these pages with a story inspired by "the nightmarish aspects and often macabre humor in the Alice *books,* The Hunting of the Snark, *and the letters of Lewis Carroll; by the mystery posed in Dodgson's missing diaries; and by Elton John's song, 'All the Young Girls Love Alice.'"*

Never Seen by Waking Eyes

By Stephen Dedman

They say that we Photographers are a blind race at best: that we learn to look at even the prettiest faces as so much light and shade; that we seldom admire, and never love.

—Lewis Carroll, *A Photographer's Day Out*

THE REVEREND CHARLES Lutwidge Dodgson, the logician and photographer and lesser-known mirror image of Lewis Carroll, first met Alice Liddell when she was three. John Ruskin, a fellow lecturer at Oxford, was also smitten with young Alice, and later became obsessed with twelve-year-old Rose La Touche. Edgar Allan Poe married his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia. Dante fell in love with Beatrice when she was eight and a half.

If you expect me to add my name to this list, you're out of your mind.

* * *

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"He was terrified of the night," she said, softly. "Terrified of dreaming, I think. Even beds frightened him."

I nodded. I don't remember any nighttime scenes at all in either of the *Alice* books, or *Snark*, or even *Sylvie and Bruno*, and the only mention of a bed to come to mind was "summon to unwelcome bed/A melancholy maiden!/We are but elder children, dear,/Who fret to find our bedtime near." The hunters of the Snark "hunted till darkness came on," with not a word of what happened afterward, and *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* ends (and not a moment too soon) with the stars appearing in a bright blue sky. True, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is set at midnight, and features an oyster-bed, but the sun stays up the whole time.

"How did you meet?"

Alice smiled prettily, without showing the tips of her teeth. "In London, outside a theater — the Lyceum, I think. I'd seen him before, but I had no idea who he was. When I told him my name, he said, 'So you are another Alice. I'm very fond of Alices.'"

"When was this?"

"Winter. I don't remember the year, but he was about thirty, and he hadn't written *Wonderland* yet, and I think Prince Albert was still alive. Eighteen sixty, maybe." I nodded. Dodgson was a compulsive diarist, but many of his diaries disappeared after his death, like his letters to Alice Liddell, and all of his photographs and sketches of naked little girls.

I suppose it started in the darkroom, at home: developing old, half-forgotten rolls of film is the safest form of time travel; you don't need a license, or even a seat belt. This roll had been in the Nikon for at least a year, and when I finally sat down with the proof sheet and a glass of Glenfiddich, I was ready to see anything. Forty minutes and two glasses later, I was still wondering why the hell I'd taken five shots of Folly Bridge. Granted that it's where the famous rowing expedition and the story of Wonderland started, and that I don't get up to Oxford as often as I'd like, it's been photographed more often than Capa shot "Death in the Afternoon."

There was nothing mysterious about any of the other shots, at least to me. On the proof sheet, they all look harmless enough — a busy street in Bangkok, far enough from Patpong to be safe; a beach near Townsville; [illegible] in Tokyo; the Poe Cottage in Philadelphia; a slum in Brasilia or Rio.

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An extremely observant eye (such as Poe's) would notice a particularly beautiful little girl in almost every shot — never in the center, but always perfectly in focus. She isn't the same girl. She's always the same girl. She always has dark hair, black or almost black; pale skin; large eyes. Small, slight, almost elfin. The girl in Townsville is probably no older than ten; the girl in Bangkok may be twelve or twenty or anywhere in between. She isn't the same girl. She's always the same girl. And her name is —

I stared at the photographs of Folly Bridge; five shots, from slightly different perspectives, but all from the St. Aldates side. Long shadows — evening, probably just before sunset. And no girl. Where the hell did she go?

I slept badly that night, but without disturbing anyone. My dreams were obscene; you don't need the details, except that the girl from Folly Bridge was...there.

She was smaller than the ideal, with the creamy pallor of the Londoner who can't afford to buy a tan. Her hair was short, but extremely untidy. Her eyes were too dark, impossibly dark, and her smile remained long after the dream had ended. It was not the smile of a little girl. It was the smile of something older, and wiser, and very hungry.

I woke shivering, expecting to find the sheets drenched with sweat or worse. Instead, they were completely dry, and cold, as though no one had slept there at all.

Barbara is far and away the best secretary I've ever had. She's a law school dropout, efficient, intelligent, computer literate, multilingual, empathic, diplomatic, moderately ambitious, extremely attractive, and devoutly gay; we've been having breakfast together for four years now, without ever misunderstanding each other (well, not seriously). Two of the juniors, both avid prosecutors, were sitting at a table near the door discussing the latest batch of ripper murders that were splattered across all the papers. A pot of coffee and a cherry Danish were waiting for me in my booth, and so was Barbara.

"Rough night?" she murmured, as I sat down.

I nodded. "What have I got today?"

"Partners' meeting at eight, Druitt arriving at ten and the *Mirror's* lawyers at eleven, political lunch," she grimaced slightly, "at the Savoy at two — "

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"Oh, God, is that today?"

"I've left the afternoon free."

"Good. What about tomorrow morning? Am I in court?"

"No. Not until Friday. You have two — "

"Postpone them."

She keyed something into her notebook without even blinking. "Where are you going?"

"Oxford."

Sullivan (okay, so that isn't his real name) was a numbers man for the Tories, known to his colleagues as the Lord High Executioner. If he ever invites you to lunch, hire a taster. I was still sitting down when he muttered, "I hear the *Mirror* settled."

He obviously had excellent hearing for a man his age; we'd signed the papers less than twenty minutes before. I merely grunted. "I hope it was expensive?" he probed.

"My client's reputation is worth a lot of money."

"So is yours, by now." He smiled. Like most of the people who run most of the world, Sullivan had managed to avoid the burden of a reputation; you probably still don't know who I'm talking about. A waiter appeared, and I ordered carpetbag steak and a good burgundy. Sullivan waited until he was gone, then asked, "Are you planning to stay in London long?"

"I go where the firm sends me," I replied, "but I think I'll be here for a few years yet. I'd certainly prefer to; it beats hell out of New York."

He smiled. "Good. I won't waste your time, or mine. Have you ever considered a career in politics?" I shrugged. "All right. What if I said there was going to be a safe seat vacant before the next election?"

"I'm *not interested*," I replied, without any hesitation.

"Think about it. This isn't America; you wouldn't have to quit your practice. I know what you're worth — believe me, I do — and all right, MPs' salaries are pitifully low: even the travel allowance isn't much of a compensation. But you wouldn't have to give any of it up. *I* haven't; you know that." I nodded; he'd been a client of ours for many years "Hell, you already give away more money than most rock stars, more than most people can even dream about. All those kids you sponsor, all those

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donations to UNICEF and refugees — oh, don't look so bloody surprised. You really thought nobody knew? Welcome to the twentieth century, or what's left of it."

I said nothing.

"I'm not going to bullshit you," he lied. "I don't know *why* you do it, what you get out of it, but I don't care, either, if it's what you want to do. But if you *really* want to help the street kids or starving Thais or whoever, you'll consider my offer very carefully."

"Why me?"

"Because I know you can win. You always do. You're the best libel lawyer in the business, you haven't lost a case in years; I've seen you convince juries that black is white and queer is straight. You're a born politician." He paused, leaning back in his chair. "And I'll be honest. I know the other parties haven't approached you yet, and I know they will, and I know we can double whatever they offer."

"You can relax," I assured him. "I'll tell them the same thing I told you. I'm not interested."

"Why not?"

"For one thing, I don't believe it'll be as easy as you make out. I'm single, and I've lived most of my life in the States. Secondly, it's not what I want to do. Thirdly, I've never intended to become a public figure; I prefer to keep my private life private."

Sullivan snorted. "Like I said, this isn't America; *we* don't expect politicians to be moral paragons. We've had too many kings, and far too many princes; nobody gives a damn if an MP's not married, or if he bonks his secretary occasionally. Besides, you were born here, your father was some sort of war hero, you grew up in Boston so you speak better English than half the BBC, and you're a Rhodes scholar to boot. As for your private life, all right, I know you can't give a lecture without bonking one of the students, but what does that matter? They're all *girls*, aren't they?"

I looked at him, and said nothing. He was probably right about English politicians' private lives; nobody's ever given *him* any shit about the curious resemblance between his twenty-seven-year-old second wife and his fifteen-year-old daughter. The wife's not brilliant, but I'm sure she's guessed which of them he really wants to fuck. "Yes, they're all girls."

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"And all over sixteen." He waved his fat fingers dismissively, then shut up as the waiter returned with our lunch. "All right. At least consider it. I don't need an answer for another week."

I parked near the corner of Thames and St. Aldates, and stared at Folly Bridge, wondering if it had ever deserved its name so thoroughly before. The urge to turn the Jag around and return to London was almost palpable. Instead, I took a deep breath, unbuckled my seat belt, opened the door, and stepped out into the thin October sunshine. Having come this far, the least I could do was visit some of the booksellers. Besides, it was a week before Michaelmas term, and I could wander around the colleges again without hordes of undergraduates making me feel like a fossil.

It was past six and almost dark when I headed back to the carpark, footsore from the cobbles, with fresh catalogues from Waterfield's and Thorntons in my briefcase. There was a girl standing outside Alice's Shop, staring into the window, though the shop had been closed for over an hour. She turned when she heard me, and we stared at each other across the road.

I *knew*, even before I saw her face, that it was the little girl from my nightmare. She was small, maybe nine or ten years old, wearing ripped jeans, sneakers, and a very baggy sweatshirt; her shoulder-length dark hair might have been loosely curled or merely tangled. She leaned back against the window, her right hand cupped before her, in what must have been a deliberate imitation of Dodgson's photograph of Alice Liddell as a beggar-girl.

I stood there frozen for a moment, and then a tourist bus passed between us, blocking my view. Hastily, I turned and resumed walking south; when I looked back, over my shoulder, she was gone. I hurried along, not even wanting to wonder why.

She was five or six meters behind me when I reached the carpark, and she followed me all the way to the Jag. I fumbled for the remote and unlocked the door, almost expecting her to rush ahead of me and climb in. Instead, she disappeared while my back was turned, and I slid into the seat and locked myself in. I sat there for a moment, breathing heavily, then turned the headlights on. She was standing in front of the car, close enough that the lights illuminated the Oxford crest on her dirty sweatshirt but not her face. After a moment's hesitation, I reached across and unlocked the

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passenger side door, and waited. I heard the door close again, and she was on me; I felt her bite, and saw nothing.

The contents of my wallet were spread across the passenger seat when I opened my eyes again, but nothing seemed to be missing except the girl. I examined myself in the mirror; I looked bleary-eyed and slightly disheveled, and maybe a little pale, but not injured. I peered at my watch; 7:56. If I hurried, I could be back in London by nine.

I DECIDED TO work late on Thursday, finishing a paper for the *Harvard Law Review*, but sent Barbara home in time for her karate class as a reward for not asking any embarrassing questions. The words I needed, exactly the *right* words, seemed to appear on the monitor as soon as I knew what I wanted to say; normally, when I write, there seems to be a block between my head and my hands, and everything I try to say clunks and screeches, and I spend hours facing the window rather than stare at the screen. This night, I became so absorbed in my work that it was well after midnight when I looked at my watch and realized why my coffee was so cold and the chambers had become so quiet; everyone else (even the Hatter, who still lives on Eastern Standard Time) had departed, leaving me utterly alone. I looked out the window again, and shivered and reached for my overcoat and umbrella.

It was cold, and the rain had slowed to a drizzle, almost a mist. The whole city felt somber and slimy and strange. The streets were deserted, and the only noise was the faint growl of the Jag and the occasional short hiss as something or someone appeared from the gloom and I had to brake. The statue of Eros looked more like a vampire, and I thought I saw some shadows move beneath it as I passed, a huddle of junkies or a bag lady with a shopping trolley. Driving through London protected by tinted glass and electronic locks always feels *wrong*, somehow, even in filthy weather; on good days, I feel as though I'm cruising (or catacombing, as my Texan cousins call it); bad nights, I just feel like a voyeur.

As soon as I arrived home, I closed all the curtains and turned on all the lights, then chose a CD at random and turned the stereo up full blast. It wasn't enough to make the place feel like home (it's a company flat; even

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the paintings are investments), but at least it felt warm and relatively secure.

Most of the partners decorated their rooms with the inevitable Spy caricatures of judges; I prefer to leave the judges outside when I can, and my taste in art runs more to Brian Frouds and Patrick Woodroffes. My private library clashes with the rest of the leatherbound decor, but what the Hell. I collapsed on the couch, and reached for my much-thumbed copy of *Faeries*. The little girls scattered among the horrors and grotesquerie looked so clean, so innocent, so ethereal. A pretty elf looked back at me with almond-shaped night-shaded eyes, for all the world like —

I dropped the book, which fell open to the sketch of Leanan-Sidhe. "On the Isle of Man," the text read, "she is the blood-sucking vampire and in Ireland the muse of poets. Those inspired by her live brilliant, though short, lives."

There was a knock on the door.

> *I will drink to your health, if only I can remember, and if you don't mind — but perhaps you object? You see, if I were to sit by you at breakfast, and to drink your tea, you wouldn't like* that, *would you? You would say "Boo! hoo! Here's Mr. Dodgson drunk all my tea, and I haven't got any left!" So I am very much afraid, next time Sybil looks for you, she'll find you by the sad sea wave, and crying "Boo! hoo! Here's Mr. Dodgson has drunk my health, and I haven't got any left!"*
>
> —Lewis Carroll, letter to Gertrude Chataway, 1875

I looked through the peephole. It was her, of course, still in the same dirty sweatshirt and tattered jeans. I drew a deep breath, and then opened the door slightly. She smiled.

"Can I come in?" She had a little girl's voice, a rather thin soprano, but it was well-modulated, almost polished: Marilyn Monroe with a hint of Oxford accent. Her tone was curious, rather than arrogant or imploring; her eyes merely watchful.

"Can I stop you?" I asked, only half joking. The building was supposed to be impregnable; even if she'd managed to sneak through the lobby while

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the doorkeeper was busy, there were cameras in every lift and corridor. "How did you get here?"

"By coach, and bus. Your address was in your wallet."

"Why?"

"Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Who are you?"

"My name's Alice," she replied, as though that were an answer.

"*What* are you?"

She paused, smiling with her eyes as though she were trying to invent something. "What do I look like?" she asked, finally. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"What will you do if I don't?"

"Go away," she replied, "and not come back."

I stood there, trying to convince myself that it was stupid to be scared of a little girl, barely half a meter high, no matter how dark her eyes were. I tried to imagine myself shutting the door, and going on with my life. And then I stepped back, and let her in.

"What do you want?" I asked, after she'd folded herself up on the chaise longue, her arms around her knees.

"What do *you* want?" she replied, still looking around curiously.

"I asked first."

"A place to stay during the day," she replied. "Some new clothes. An alibi, occasionally. And maybe you could drive me somewhere, sometimes. I don't know how long I'll want to stay; probably a couple of weeks, maybe a month. Your turn."

"Is that all?"

"What else are you offering?"

"What are *you* offering?"

Her eyes lit up, suddenly; she'd noticed the open book on the couch, and the rest of the library. "You've got a lot of *Alice* books. How many?"

"Forty-two."

"Holy shit — oh, sorry. Why?"

"Different illustrators."

She nodded. "You must know a lot about Lewis Carroll."

"No, not really. There's a lot about him that no one knows."

"I could tell you some of it. I knew him."

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I sat down opposite her, and tried not to smile. "How old are you?"

"I don't really know. Eight or nine."

"He died in eighteen ninety-eight," I said, gently.

She looked at me, impatiently. "I know. He got sick just after Christmas, and died a couple of weeks before his birthday. Or so I heard, after he didn't come back. I was still in Oxford; he could hardly take me with him to his sisters' home, could he?

"Don't look at me like that; you *know* I'm not making this up."

"Then you must be a hundred years old, at least."

She shook her head indignantly; I think she would have stamped her foot, if she'd been standing up. "I'm eight years old, and I'll *always* be eight years old. That was what he wanted. That's why he loved me.

"I knew him," she repeated, "and I knew things about him that he didn't even tell his diary, things that no one else remembers. I can tell you what I know, and I've told you what I want in return. Do we have a deal?"

"How do you know it's what I want?"

She laughed. It wasn't a child's laugh, but the way one laughs at a child. "I saw you when you came to Oxford last summer — June, was it?"

"July."

"I saw you looking in Alice's shop, and in Christ Church, saw you looking up at his rooms.... And you took my photograph. You pretended you were just taking a picture of Folly Bridge. Have you printed that photo yet?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't in it, was I?"

"No."

She nodded. "*He* found that, when he brought me up to Oxford for some photographs. I didn't know; photographs were new and strange, then, almost magic, and *very* expensive. That's how he found out what I was. I'd never even seen myself in a looking-glass, and I didn't know that I never could; looking-glasses were for the rich, and clean water I could see myself in? In London, last century? Hah! I can't even remember seeing myself naked before — "

"You're a vampire..." I whispered.

She laughed, a little sadly. "'This must be the wood where things have no names,'" she quoted. "'I wonder what'll become of my name when I go in? I shouldn't like to lose it at all — because they'd have to give me

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another, and it would almost certainly be an ugly one.'" She looked at the mirror over the bar, and said, "You can call me a vampire, if you like. *I* always think of vampires as male. We usually call ourselves sidhe, or mara, or succubi, or even lamia. But don't worry; I promise not to bite."

"You bit me in Oxford."

She pouted. "Not *badly*; I didn't take any more than I needed. You'll be okay. We *do* live off the living, usually while they're asleep; they feel sick the next day, or depressed, but we don't leave any scars, and we try to give them time to recover. Nowadays, we mostly survive on suicides and roadkill and junkies who're going to die anyway; we leave before the ambulance arrives, and no one notices if the bodies are missing a pint or two of blood.... Maybe that's why they say suicides become vampires. Of course, they don't, or the world'd be full of them. Us.

"And there are the symbiotes, who know what we are — mostly artists or writers. They give us blood, and we give them dreams."

I slept badly that night. Knowing that there's a vampire in your guest room makes it difficult to relax, and I was terrified of what I might dream.

Why didn't I just throw her out? Maybe because I wasn't sure that I could, wasn't sure what she'd do to me if I tried. And she'd known Charles Dodgson for nearly forty years. Maybe she knew —

I HAD NO EXPERIENCE buying clothes for little girls, but I didn't want to tell anyone about Alice (not even Barbara), and I couldn't take her shopping until she had something better than her Oxford rags. I stopped at a Marks & Sparks on the way home and bought a collection of garments that were roughly the right size. They looked wrong on her when she first tried them on, wrong as a gymslip on a page three girl, but she was a good enough actress to get away with it.

She spent the night telling me about her first encounter with Dodgson. "He asked if he could write to my mother, to get her permission. Anna, my teacher — another sidhe — was working at the theater, so I told him she was my mother.

"His rooms were full of books — and toys, of course, but I remember the books better. Anna was teaching me to read, but she wasn't very good

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at it. When he saw how fascinated I was, he gave me a few books, to keep. I don't think it was meant as a bribe, though he always regarded Londoners as horribly commercial — he was a terrible snob.

"He photographed me in his rooms — this was before they let him build a studio on the roof — and let me watch as he developed the plates in a closet.... I hadn't really known what to expect, and I think he was too surprised to be frightened. Every time I visited him, after that, he had more books on ghosts and things like that — *The Wonders of the Invisible World, The History of Apparitions, The Vampire*...most of it crap. They were easily gulled in those days. Arthur Conan Doyle even believed in *fairies*....

"I met the Liddell girls a few times. They were snobs, too, especially Alice, but angels compared to their mother. Alice *should've* been an absolute brat: she was beautiful and knew it, and *everyone* loved her; men, women, even a prince..."

"You?"

"I liked her. I didn't expect to, but I did."

"And Dodgson?"

She shrugged. "Dodgson loved all of them, like he loved most pretty girls who were willing to trust him — until they became teenagers, anyway. Ina was twelve or thirteen when I met her, and already seriously built; I think she scared him a lot worse than I did."

Saturday was a typical London spring day, bleak and damp and gray — though Alice warned me that we'd have to come home if the sun appeared; it wouldn't kill her quickly, but a few hours worth would hurt and could crack her skin. Driving down Gower Street, she glanced through the window at a bag lady, and sat up. "You know her?" I asked.

"Yes. She's...she's one of us, but she doesn't know it. She doesn't even know she's dead, she can't remember being alive, she doesn't even know why the sun hurts her; she just does her best to hide from it. She's probably been living on cats, rats, all sorts of garbage."

We turned into New Oxford Street, and I asked her to keep an eye out for a parking spot. "You said, last night, that you drank blood. Need it be human blood?"

She shook her head. "It has to be human, but it doesn't really *have* to be blood; sperm will do, but we need much more of it than one man can

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make. Hundred years ago, some of the sidhe could fuck or suck enough men a night to stay alive that way, but not now. It takes too long, and it's not worth the effort unless all the men come to you. There are still some vampires in the beats and the bath-houses — never trust the boys who don't ask you to use a condom, some things are a lot worse than AIDS — but even *they* need blood sometimes. I don't know why. None of us are scientists. But it has to be human, too, or you start losing your mind. Or your soul, maybe. You lose *you*, anyhow; you become stupid, you start thinking like an animal, hunting animals, and then you die. Anna said that's how the stories about vampires turning into wolves and rats began — that, and the way we used to catch rabies from them, and them from us. *There's* one."

I jumped, then realized she meant a parking spot, not a vampire. "Thanks."

The weekend passed much too quickly, and on Monday morning I returned reluctantly to Chambers and the negative nineties. The Hatter and I were dissecting a lease and trying to bore a large hole in the boilerplate when the phone rang. It was Sullivan, wanting to cancel our lunch. I agreed, and hung up, and enjoyed the feeling of relief for nearly a minute before I realized that Sullivan and I hadn't *made* an appointment for lunch, and that he would simply have told his secretary to phone my secretary if we had. I asked the Hatter to excuse me, and slipped out of the room. Barbara was sitting at her desk, staring intently at the screenpeace as it created mazes and blundered through them. "I just spoke to Sullivan," I said, softly.

"Yes, I know."

"We weren't having lunch today, were we?"

"Not that I heard."

"What's happened? Is he sick?" He *had* sounded a little strange — almost emotional.

"I don't think so," she said carefully. "I think it's his wife — and I think you'd better call him back."

I nodded, and ducked back into my room. The Hatter looked up from the photocopies he'd spread over my desk. He's a remarkably ugly man, with a distinct resemblance to a New College gargoyle — big hands and

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feet, big eyes, a huge nose, and frizzy ginger hair that no dye nor wig could conceal or control — as well as being a hopeless advocate, but he has an excellent memory for precedents and a fetish for minute detail. He started gathering up the papers as soon as he saw my expression, and quickly disappeared. I slumped into my chair, and reached for the phone.

Sullivan told me the story with remarkable economy, for a politician; Sylvia, his wife, had gone out on Saturday night, and not returned. He hadn't reported her as missing (the police won't act, or even listen very hard, until someone's been gone forty-eight hours), and wanted the whole affair kept as quiet as possible. There was something decidedly strange about the way he said "affair," and I took a deep breath before asking, "What can I do?"

"If this gets out, I'm going to have to call a press conference. I'll need you there, just to make sure everybody minds their manners. Are you with me?"

If there was a threat in there, it was unusually quiet; he sounded more tired than anything else. If I'd said no, it probably wouldn't have cost me anything more than my job, maybe not even that. "I'll be there," I replied. "If necessary, that is. I'm sure she'll turn up before it comes to that."

He grunted. "Okay. Remember, if you get another offer, I'll beat it; that's a promise. I'll be in touch."

ALICE WAS asleep when I returned home — or dead, maybe, but she *looked* asleep. She was lying on the bed in the guest room, curled up into a fetal ball, still wearing her jeans and anorak from the night before. Her eyes were closed, and her face had relaxed into a pretty, girlish pout. I stood in the doorway watching her for a few minutes, and then crept into the kitchen. I enjoy cooking, when I have the time, and I often suspect I make the best chili in England. Alice appeared, wrinkling her nose, while I was chopping garlic. "Sorry. Is this, ah..."

She shrugged. "Don't worry. It doesn't hurt me, it just fucks up my sense of smell. How was your day?"

"Pretty awful. I spent most of it helping a bank get away with knocking down an old building and replacing it with an office tower

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that looks uncannily like a giant refrigerator; the rest of the time, I helped a politician pretend to look for his wife. How about you?"

"Nothing exciting. Can you drive me down to Piccadilly, later?"

I nodded. She sat in the dining room and watched me cook, and chatted about some of Dodgson's other child-friends and models whom she'd met — Gertrude Chataway, Beatrice Hatch, Connie Gilchrist, Isa Bowman, Ina Watson, Xie Kitchin, others whose names she'd forgotten. He'd photographed all of them as near naked as they would allow, frequently with their mothers present; the child nude was a favorite subject of Victorian artists, and several of the girls had also modeled for Henry Holiday (then better known for his stained glass windows) or Harry Furniss. "I only saw most of them once or twice," she said. "He usually lost interest in them when they turned eleven or twelve — I remember he was particularly nasty to Connie, as though it were her fault that she was growing up — but he was still calling Gertrude 'dear child' when she was nearly thirty, and she let him; I guess she enjoyed it. I bumped into her when she visited in eighteen ninety-something, and she recognized me, and we had to pretend I was the daughter of the girl she'd met when she was eight." She laughed. "Of course, I didn't know any of them well; they were sunlight girls."

"He was lucky," I said, as I stirred the chili. "Nowadays, parents can be arrested for photographing their own children naked, even in the bath. So much for progress."

She looked at me coolly. "Have you ever read any Victorian porn? A hell of a lot of it's about old men fucking girls of ten or eleven, and that wasn't just a fantasy; it was common practice. There's been *some* progress; women and kids are better off, even if the men aren't."

"Sorry. It was a stupid thing to say."

"Yeah. It was. And okay, it's a stupid law, but where do you draw the line?" She shrugged. "You want to know if he fucked them, don't you? That's what everyone else asks — or if they don't ask, it's what they wonder. Do you want me to tell you?"

I didn't answer. She sat there silently for nearly a minute, then, softly, "He didn't even want to.

"No, that's a lie. Sometimes, he *did* want to — he dreamed about it, even fantasized about it, though he did whatever he could to distract

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himself from these fantasies — writing letters, inventing mathematical problems.... But I don't think he ever touched any of them, especially not when they were naked, and I think *that's* what matters.

"He never touched *me*, and I knew him for nearly forty years, and while I was physically as delicate and fragile and generally unsuitable for fucking as any of them, he knew I sure as shit wasn't innocent. He never let me touch him, either; and he hit me when I offered to fellate him. Knocked me across the room — he was a lot stronger than he looked — and apologized later. The thought really horrified him."

Which meant he'd probably had it before, I thought; a man confronted with a *new* idea, however horrific, has to think about it for a moment before he can react. But I didn't say anything.

"He wanted to be the White Knight, courteous and gentle and dreamy, and clumsy, and bad at his job...and he never removed his armor. I think what he *really* wanted was for sex not to matter. He wanted to be a boy again — no, a child. Even being a boy implied that sex existed."

"'I am fond of children,'" I quoted, "'except boys.'"

She nodded. "He grew up surrounded by sisters and younger brothers, until they sent him off to school, which he hated. He wanted to return home; I think he spent the rest of his life wanting to return to that home. He was never really cut out to be an adult; he stuttered whenever he spoke to adults, he wasn't even interested in *money*, let alone sex. He just liked studying, and solving mathematical problems, and writing little satires and nonsense, and surrounding himself with toys and books and children — all the things he'd done as a child. He never 'put away childish things,' as he once put it, and we loved him for it. Without him, *I* wouldn't have had a childhood at all."

I looked down at the skillet, and realized that I was burning my dinner. I rescued it as best I could, and asked, "Why didn't you make him a vampire?"

"I don't know how — Anna never taught me — and, anyway, he wouldn't have wanted it. It was too late; I couldn't make him a child again, couldn't give him back his innocence, and he wouldn't have wanted to be thirty or forty forever."

I nodded. There was something strange about the way she'd said "innocence," but there wasn't time for a cross-examination before the

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news, and I had to know if Sylvia Sullivan's disappearance had been noticed yet. There were stories about increases in the jobless and homeless figures, a small shipment of crack intercepted in Chunnel, and massacres in Peru, Kowloon, Johannesburg, and Atlanta; I guess they were too busy to worry about a back-bencher's wife, however photogenic. "What's happening in Piccadilly?"

"You wouldn't like it."

"I wasn't expecting an invitation. Meeting more sidhe?" It was two days before Halloween, which the British don't celebrate the way we do, but which might be Fourth of July for vampires.

"Yes."

"Going out for a bite?"

She looked at me coldly. "Do you really want to know?"

One of the first things they teach lawyers is never to ask a question unless they already know the answer. "No, I guess not."

That night, I dreamed about my childhood — something I hadn't done in years. It was my tenth birthday, and everyone was there; it wasn't until I'd woken up, still feeling good, that I began wondering what was wrong with that. I'd had a tenth birthday party, yes, and I *had* gotten my first real camera then, and my parents *were* still together and all my grandparents were still alive, so what was —

Alice was in the en-suite, brushing her teeth. I'd stopped wondering how she was getting in and out; she'd had more than a century to study burglary. "Is that what you meant when you said you give your victims dreams?"

"You're not one of my victims."

"Are you sure?"

She spat the toothpaste out of her mouth. Her eyes were blazing, and there was white froth on her chin; she looked horribly rabid. "You're a lawyer. I'm a vampire. There is such a thing as professional courtesy."

"I'm serious."

She shrugged, stuck the toothbrush back in her mouth, and glanced at the mirror; I could see my reflection, but not hers. Eventually, she said, "I didn't *give* you that dream; you dreamed it by yourself. I just helped you remember it. What's wrong?"

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"Nothing."

"Bullshit. Nightmare?"

"No."

She smiled at the mirror. "Okay. So I screwed up. Sorry; you looked happier than you had in years, and I thought...."

"*Years*?"

"I remember when you were a student. You went to University College, right? Rooms on Logic Lane?"

I nodded. "Someone in admin must have had a twisted sense of humor.... You mean you've been *watching me for twenty years*?"

"No. Just while you were at Oxford. I liked you; hell, some of us even fall in love. And I remembered your face, the way you looked at me, and when I saw you again..."

"Did you bite me then? When I was a student?"

She looked away from me. "Not seriously."

> *"Seven years and six months!" Humpty Dumpty repeated thoughtfully. "An uncomfortable sort of age. Now if you'd asked my advice, I'd have said 'Leave off at seven' — but it's too late now."*
>
> *"I never ask advice about growing," Alice said indignantly.*
>
> *"Too proud!" the other enquired.*
>
> *Alice felt even more indignant at that suggestion. "I mean," she said, "that one can't help growing older."*
>
> *"One can't, perhaps," said Humpty Dumpty; "but two can. With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven."*
>
> —Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

There was nothing about Sylvia Sullivan in the news that morning, and, as soon as the partners' meeting was finished, I asked Barbara to put a call through to Sullivan; it'd be just like the pompous prick not to tell me if she'd come back. She hadn't.

A moment later, Barbara walked in without announcing herself. I put down the brief Midas had given me. "What's wrong?"

"You're looking for Sylvia Sullivan?"

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I shrugged. As far as I knew, no one was. "Do you know where she is?"

"No..."

"But?"

She sat down, uncomfortably. "I've seen her around the bars before..."

I blinked. "Gay bars?"

"Yeah. Not often — maybe once, twice a month. I think she's got some boyfriends, too. Nothing steady. Do you know her?"

Obviously not. "No."

"I don't know her well, either...we've had a few drinks, and talked, but never fucked or anything.... I don't even know who *has* fucked her. For all I know, she may be straight."

I had to think about that. It didn't help. "I don't understand."

"She was lonely. I don't think she was looking to get laid, but she probably wouldn't have said no if that was the asking price. She just wanted to be wanted; failing that, she got drunk, and took a taxi home. Do you know the Elton John song 'All the Young Girls Love Alice'? From *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*?" I shook my head. "Pity. Sylvia...she's a good looking woman, married to an old bastard who never fucks her without fantasizing he's fucking someone else. Can you imagine what that's like?"

I tried. "Where do you think she is?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her in weeks. There are lots of places she might have been that night."

"Can you give me a list?"

She thought about it for a moment, staring out the window. "Maybe. Promise me you won't just give it to Sullivan?"

"Why?"

"If you find her, that's one thing. She may be running away, hiding, whatever, from the old shit; she may not want to be found. If you look for her, find her, I can live with that — but I'm not handing her back to him on a platter. I don't know her well, and I never fucked her, but I owe her that much."

"If she was trying to get away, wouldn't she just divorce him?"

She snorted. "Divorce Sullivan? Where would she find a divorce lawyer who'd dare? Some kid straight out of school, if she was lucky. And

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he'd have the Hatter doing the research, and you or Ashcroft or Midas if it ever got to court.... More likely the old bloodsucker'd get some shrink to have her committed — "

I shuddered and stared out the window. London stared back at me, secure in her bulk, like a dinosaur that doesn't realize that it's being killed. "Could *you* go?"

"What?"

"Go to the clubs, or bars, or wherever. Take my card, and the Jag, and a photo, and ask if anyone's seen her. If they haven't, you don't even have to tell me where you went." I turned away from the window, and almost managed to look Barbara in the eye. "I'll pay you overtime, of course."

She hesitated, then nodded. "When shall I start?"

"Are they open this early?"

"A few of them..."

I tossed her the car keys, and she backed out of the room. I looked over at the window again, at the thick gray clouds and the thin gray sunlight. All the young girls love —

Barbara returned at five, and I handed her a wad of taxi vouchers. I didn't need to ask whether she'd had any joy. Getting lost in London is easy — you don't even have to try — and I had no good reason to believe that Sylvia was still in London. I'd tried to persuade Sullivan to report her as missing, and he said he'd think about it (Jesus, I hate being lied to, even if it's by a professional). At least he found her passport; her credit cards were still missing, but they hadn't been used since a visit to Harrods on Saturday morning, a fact that cheered him immensely.

I met Barbara for breakfast the next morning. Someone who *might* have been Sylvia Sullivan had been seen in a bar on Greek Street on Saturday night. She'd talked to, danced with, and accepted drinks from at least three men and one woman, but the barman hadn't noticed if she'd left with any of them. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think...but it doesn't sound as though she'd *arranged* to meet any of them."

I sipped at my coffee, forcing myself to wake up. "I agree."

"What now? The taxi drivers?"

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I shook my head. "The old man can only cover up for so long; soon, someone's bound to notice that she's gone, and then it'll be the cops' baby. Or she might come back." I probably didn't sound very convincing.

I was ten years old again, looking through a viewfinder and waiting for the flash to recharge, and Irene was sitting on my bed reading, and someone touched my neck and shoulder —

I lay there, wide-eyed in the darkness, feeling as though I were trapped in a bed that was smaller than I was. My feet seemed incredibly far away, and the ceiling much too close, and the red-lipped girl standing beside the bed was —

"You were dreaming again," Alice said. "I thought I'd better wake you."

I sat up slowly, vaguely remembering that I was thirty-nine years old and six foot two. "Thanks...I think. What's the time?"

"About four."

I peered at her blearily, and tried to focus; my night vision isn't what it used to be (but then again, it never was). "Where've you been — no, forget I asked. Was it a nightmare?"

"Don't you remember?"

"I — " I blinked, and suddenly felt very cold. "I — no."

She stared at me, shook her head, and turned to walk out. "No. Please." I rubbed my eyes. "Look, I won't be able to get back to sleep, now. Tell me more about Dodgson."

She stopped, looked over her shoulder, said "No," and continued walking.

"Why not?"

"You're lying to me."

I sat there, numb, and watched her leave. Finally, I muttered, "I'm sorry."

A moment later, she reappeared in the doorway. "Tell *me* a story," she suggested.

"What?"

"You're obsessed with a children's fantasist who's been dead for nearly a hundred years — even more obsessed than you were when you were seventeen. *Why*?"

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"I liked his books a lot when I was a kid. My mother used to read them to me; she still loved them, probably because they were so English. When I went to Oxford, everyone seemed more interested in Charles Dodgson the pedophile than Lewis Carroll the fantasist...and it pissed me off, hearing them turn someone who'd written books that made so many kids happy into some sort of monster. I mean, there wasn't any evidence, none of the kids or even the parents accused him, *you* know it wasn't true.... I guess it became my first libel case, in a way. I did my damnedest to prove him innocent..."

Alice stared at me, darkly, and then nodded. It was nothing but the truth, though she must have guessed it wasn't the *whole* truth... "Okay." She walked back into the room, and sat on the foot of the bed.

"There's a Dodgson story I don't think anyone else knows," she said, quietly. "A few people may have guessed — shit, *I'm* guessing most of it, but I had about thirty years worth of hints.

"Dodgson was always so nostalgic about his childhood that I don't think anyone's even *wondered* if he was abused as a boy. They don't know, or they forget, how much he hated his school days at Rugby. Maybe they know that he impressed the teachers, but they don't realize how much most of the boys hated him. They may have heard that he had a reputation for being able to defend himself, but they didn't hear him wishing that his school had given every boy a separate cubicle instead of putting all the beds in an open dorm...

"Maybe it was an older boy; more likely, it was a lot of them, more than he could fight off. But I'm only guessing..."

THEY FOUND Sylvia Sullivan's Gucci handbag in a trashcan near Canary Wharf that morning. It gave them the clue they needed to identify the body they'd found between two of the half-empty office blocks on Sunday. The skull had been so shattered by the fall that even the dental records hadn't been enough.

No one knew how she'd gotten up to the roof without setting off a dozen alarms. I had a sneaking suspicion, but I didn't think the coroner would believe me.

* * *

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There are skeptical thoughts, which seem for the moment to uproot the firmest faith; there are blasphemous thoughts, which dart unbidden into the most reverent souls; there are unholy thoughts, which torture, with their hateful presence, the fancy that would fain be pure.

—Lewis Carroll, *Pillow Problems*

I rushed home at lunchtime, and opened all the curtains in the house, except for the guest room. It was raining, of course, but I couldn't wait for the sun to reappear. Alice was asleep, or dead, and her clothes were scattered over the floor. I searched her pockets, finding nothing, and suddenly she rolled over and looked up.

I opened my wallet, removed a photograph of Sylvia, and flipped it at her. She caught it neatly, and flinched slightly.

"You *do* recognize her," I growled. "I'd hoped I was paranoid. Did you kill her?"

"What makes you — "

"I saw photographs of the body. There was hardly any blood at all. The coroner's trying to convince himself it was washed away by the rain. I've been trying not to wonder where you've been feeding, but now I have to know. *Did you kill her?*"

She shrank back, then shook her head slowly. "Me? No. She was already dead."

"You found her in the alley?"

"No. There was a feast on the roof." She smiled bleakly. "I was the guest of honor — the new kid in town, so to speak. I didn't know she was a friend of yours."

My knees buckled, and I pitched forward onto the bed, crying for someone I'd barely known.

"Kaarina found her," Alice continued. "She's good at spotting suicides before they jump. I don't know the whole story; she hangs around the bars and waits until she sees a jumper, usually has a few drinks with them, listens for a while, tells them that she's thinking of suicide too, suggests they both go along together.... Most of them chicken out. Sometimes they take her home, but she leaves before they find out what she is. Some of them...say yes."

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I managed to lift my head and look at her. "For Christ's sake — " My voice cracked, and I tried again. "What sort of monster — "

"I'm a vampire," she replied. "You said so yourself. Or a sidhe. Or a boojum, maybe. I can't help what I am, what I need — "

"You can help what you *do*," I snarled. "You told me you can get the blood you need without killing anyone — "

"Sometimes. It's not always easy."

I rested my head on my hands, wearily. "Easy. How easy do you think it was for Dodgson? Hating boys, but never hurting them, just shutting them out of his universe? Loving little girls, but never touching them apart from the occasional kiss? Jesus, even *Sullivan*, who's as loathsome a human being as I've ever met...he wants to fuck his daughter, but he hasn't, and I bet he never will. It's not what you want, I'll forgive you that, we can't help what we want, even if it's wrong or obscene...but Jesus, what you *do*!"

We stayed there for what seemed like hours, me kneeling by her bed like a mourner, before she whispered, "What do *you* want?"

"I want the killing to stop."

"Is that all?"

I shrugged. Alice looked down at me, then reached out and touched my shoulder where it met my neck, and whispered, "Who's Irene?"

"What?"

"When you dream, you call out for 'Irene.' You did when you were at Oxford, too. Who is she?"

I looked at her. My eyes hurt like hell from crying, something I hadn't done in nearly thirty years, and all I could see was the dark hair and darker eyes. I knew it wasn't Irene, but it might have been...

"Irene..." I began. "Irene was the first. The first girl I.... She...

"She, uh, lived two houses away, when I was a kid. Year older than me. Beautiful girl, really beautiful...her mother died when she was, I don't know, seven or eight I guess, and she lived alone with her father. He was a...I can't remember. Doesn't matter."

I took a deep breath, and tried to start again. "She was the best friend I had, and the only one who lived nearby. Her father wouldn't let anyone visit the house, but she used to sneak over to mine before he came home in the evening. Mostly, she liked to borrow books — he wouldn't buy any, or give her any money — or just sit on my bed and read.

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"When I turned ten — she was eleven and a half — I had a birthday party, and invited her, but her father wouldn't let her go. We kept hoping that he'd change his mind, or come home late, or whatever, so she was sort of guest of honor...but she didn't turn up. Jesus, I'd forgotten that party, until — anyway, my parents were splitting up, though I didn't know it then, and it was sort of my father's way of saying good-bye. He gave me a camera — a good one, a Nikon, with a zoom lens and flash.... I'd used his camera before, I was better with it than he ever was...

"Irene came over the next afternoon. The rain was pissing down, I remember that...she was saying how sorry she was that she hadn't come to the party, and she hadn't been able to buy me a present. I showed her the camera, and she asked if I'd like to take some photographs of her. I took a few close-ups of her face, and then she started unbuttoning her blouse. She said it was okay, her father took photographs of her, like that, all the time...

"I can still remember what she looked like: dark hair, like yours, big dark eyes; she was a little taller than me, but skinny, very small breasts, little pink nipples...

"When I'd taken a few photographs, we..." I tried to talk, but there was a lump in my throat that I just couldn't swallow. Finally, I whispered, "did some of the other things she and her father did all the time...

"It was nineteen sixty-six, I was ten, sex education was...well, my parents hadn't told me anything, and my teachers sure as shit hadn't. Besides, she kept saying it was okay, and I...I really liked her."

"Did your parents catch you?"

"No; I wish to hell they had. My father wasn't home yet, and my mother...I don't know. Irene dressed herself, and ran back home before her father got there. Of course, *he* knew what had happened, and when she told him that I'd taken photographs...

"He had a gun — it was supposed to be for scaring off burglars — and he went into the bathroom and shot himself in the head. But not before he shot her.

"I don't think we heard anything; if we did, we probably thought it was thunder. The rest of the story didn't come out for another few days. When it did...

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"When it did, my mother took my camera, and ripped the film out, and burnt it. I don't remember what she did to me."

I took a deep breath, and threw up all over the bed.

Alice was waiting as I emerged from the shower. She'd closed the curtains, and the darkness was almost comforting, like a confessional. I suspect I still looked like hell, but at least I felt human. Almost. I tied a robe around myself, and collapsed onto the couch. "You said she was the first," said Alice.

"Yeah. Well. I didn't have sex with *anyone* else until I'd nearly finished high school — my mother made sure of that. Just before graduation, a few of my friends and I drove down to the Combat Zone, but that was a disaster; she was older than me, with big floppy breasts and badly dyed hair and...I didn't even *try* again until I won my scholarship and came to England.

"Soho was a nightmare. I'd been told it was London's answer to the Zone, or Times Square, but I could hardly find a picture of a naked girl who wasn't being spanked, caned, or whipped. It was like the London Dungeon — you know, the horror museum for kids — where it's okay to look at nudes, as long as they're being executed or tortured. Christ. Besides, most of the models looked old enough to be my mother.

"After that, it...became better. Easier. I met a few girls at Oxford who were still in their late teens...blondes were best, and redheads. They didn't look as much like Irene, I didn't have to worry about using the wrong name, and eventually I got used to them, but it was never as good as..."

Alice nodded. "But you never fucked any other little girls?"

"Once," I admitted. "In Bangkok. There was a child brothel that a client of ours knew about, out in the back streets, they had girls as young as seven. I picked one who looked about eleven; I don't know how old she really was." I shook my head. "I couldn't go through with it, and finally she gave up and I paid her and she said 'mai pen rai,' never mind. I've sent thousands of pounds to Thailand since then, sponsoring kids, but it hasn't made me feel any better.

"And I bought some kiddie porn, once, by accident. Honest. There's a group in America called the Lewis Carroll Collectors' Guild, and I sent them some money for an illustrated catalogue. I was expecting limited

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editions or something, not pictures of...anyway, I burnt it. Only time I've ever burnt a book. I guess that's when I started trying to clear the poor guy's name."

Alice nodded. "What do you *want*?" she repeated.

I thought about that, and finally replied, "Nothing I can have. I want Irene to have survived. Even *you* can't do that."

"No," she said. "I can't. Is there anything *else* you want?"

I stared into the darkness. I could barely see Alice, just a pair of eyes and a hint of sharp teeth. "Innocence. If not mine, then...I want there never to be another Irene. I don't want any more little girls hurt. I want the obscenity to *stop*."

Long has paled that sunny sky;
Echoes fade and memories die
Autumn frosts have slain July.

Still she haunts me, phantomwise,
Alice moving under skies
Never seen by waking eyes.

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

Sullivan survived his wife's demise — politically, I mean — but I think it's put his challenge for the party chairmanship back a few years. His daughter, I'm happy to say, has been sent away to a boarding school.

There was a postcard from Bangkok in my In Tray this morning. Having a wonderful time; Alice. It's good to know things are going well; it wasn't easy (or cheap), sending a dozen Sidhe to Thailand, finding flights that left and arrived at night, arranging passports for little girls who were born fifty, a hundred, or a hundred and fifty years ago.

I take another look at the article in the *Telegraph*, warning about tourists disappearing in Bangkok, and white male corpses being found in the back streets. *Bled* white. And then I fold the paper, and reach for the atlas, and wonder where I'm going to send them next.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

AS I WRITE THIS, the Hugo nominations have just been announced. Bob Eggleton's cover for our October/November 1995 issue has received a nomination (as have Gary Lippincott for his January, 1995 cover, Esther Friesner for "A Birthday," Maureen McHugh for "The Lincoln Train," and, well me, for best editor (thanks!)). In case you don't recall Bob's cover, it deftly illustrated **Marc Laidlaw's** story "Dankden," about the bard Gorlen, who had a gargoyle affliction. (His hand turned to stone at the most inopportune times.) In September, Gorlan is back in "Catamounts," a story which pits the bard against a wizard named Dog and a host of feline creatures.

The adventures continue under the able hand of **Ben Bova**. Ben has written a send-up of some sf classics in "The Great Moon Hoax (or A Princess of Mars)." When a story begins with a Martian named Jazzbow — a typical Martian, by the way, and a great baseball fan — you know you're in for something special.

Finally, the aliens take over in **John Crowley's** cover story, "Gone." Only the invasion isn't like something out of the old pulps. In fact, it's quite subtle, and told only as Crowley can.

Our blockbuster October/November issue is next on the slate. **Carolyn Ives Gilman** returns with a mind-blowing science fiction story, and Hugo-nominee **Ron Walotsky** provides the equally stunning cover illustration. **Gene Wolfe, Harlan Ellison**, and **Michael Bishop** also add their talents to our pages. So subscribe now. This is an issue you don't want to miss!

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